THE DIVISION: UBISOFT DETAILS ITS OPEN WORLD SHOOTER

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GOTHAM CITY GOES TO HELL

How Batman: Arkham Origins brings next-gen design to today's consoles

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Batman means a lot to me. On the day you're reading this, I have undoubtedly done something Batman-related, whether it's three-starring *Arkham City*'s challenge rooms with Robin, rereading Grant Morrison's beautifully-told seven-year *Batman* run or arguing with this magazine's features editor about why Bradley Cooper shouldn't play Bruce Wayne in *Man Of Steel 2* (so many reasons).

The Dark Knight is written into our cultural language. I think there's something about this character that motivates great storytelling out of talented creators, and that's carried through to our medium with the *Arkham* titles. The credibility of this icon at his published or cinematic best is certainly in there – we just get to experience it in an unprecedented, involving way.

Arkham Origins is, in many regards, a risk for Warner Bros. An untested new studio handling this prized franchise, tasked with interpreting the Caped Crusader's early years in Gotham City while original developers Rocksteady works on something that we hope is *JLA*-shaped. Warner Montreal has the passion to see this through – this issue, we'll show you how it plans to honour that remarkable legacy.

Samuel Roberts
EDITOR

Brain Age Check

...Oh dear... Your brain is very tired. But don't lose heart!





Your brain age is

138

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RETRO



FAVOURITES

Exclusive reveal on the monster franchise's very modern return. Find out how Super Mario 64 influenced EA's life sim…

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Inset Mark became fluent in Japanese – which has not only helped him form a strong relationship with Shuhei Yoshida, but also facilitated his return to game design.

Bexxxx As ever, the worth of a console will ultimately be determined by the quality of its exclusives. *InFamous: Second Son* is one of the less predictable launch window titles that has a better chance than ever of finding the series a big audience.

Below A clear killer app has yet to emerge for Sony, though there are some candidates.

Left The PS4 has emerged from E3 2013 very favourably, and while Cerny was reluctant to talk about user interface or DRM, we get the idea that his humble approach to console design informed these decisions.

DATA STREAM → MICROSOFT SUPPORTS SELF-PUBLISHING ON XBOX ONE AFTER A POLICY REVERSAL

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(CREATING TOMORROW)

Building The PlayStation 4

→ **games™** sits down with the mind behind the PlayStation 4, Mark Cerny, and discuss how the new hardware came to be

PlayStation 4 lead architect Mark Cerny took to the stage at Develop in Brighton to deliver a keynote speech, revealing the genesis of Sony's next-gen system and how he shaped the console. Cerny sat down with **games™** following the keynote and revealed what we can expect from the future of interactive entertainment.

His most important work might still be on the horizon. Cerny has worked as the PS4's lead system architect since 2008, guiding the hardware that Sony is placing so much hope and stock into as we approach the next decade of gaming, as the missteps of the PS3's launch are cautiously avoided.

Cerny's road to the appointment is important, as it reveals the intent behind the PS4's design. Quitting university in 1982 aged 17, he took a position as designer and programmer at Atari, creating the successful *Marble Madness* in 1984. He would later move East to work with Sega, producing *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, before he was invited to work on one of the industry's most ambitious failures – the 3DO Interactive Multiplayer. While the 3DO failed to gain any traction, his move back to California facilitated his appointment as vice president of Universal Interactive Studios in 1994, where he also became one of the first non-Japanese developers to work on the original PlayStation. The time at Universal saw Cerny oversee development on two of Sony's most important brands, *Crash Bandicoot* and *Spyro The Dragon*. Those games and their sequels sold over 30 million copies, and allowed Cerny to found his own consultancy, where he has since worked tirelessly producing and designing videogames for Sony in an advisory position. Cerny's three decades in the industry led him to a position where he felt comfortable approaching president of Sony Worldwide Studios Shuhei Yoshida for the position of lead architect, "I knew it was a bit audacious, but I went to Shuhei and pitched him the idea that I would be lead architect for the PS4, and asked him if he thought it was possible. To my amazement, Shu said yes."

"I did feel very strongly that a game developer should lead hardware development at Sony Computer Entertainment," says Cerny. "The way I look at it, it's very important to have a focused technical view on what the details on the hardware are, and how as a programmer you can utilise them to make the games more cinematic or more realistic. It's also very useful to have the global perspective of how that hardware is going to fit into the process of game development and result in a game coming out in its intended timeframe at its intended budget. So my strong belief is somebody who had been a programmer and a producer should be leading the charge on the next generation."

The PS4 is being touted as a console 'by game creators for game creators', and nothing affirms that ethic more than having Cerny guiding proceedings. "We are developer-inspired and consumer-focused," says Cerny speaking with **games™** following his keynote. "Our focus was to create a console that could legitimately be called 'by game creators for game creators' with the ultimate intent of having that rich line-up of games available on the platform. And I think that's been a tremendous success," he says confidently, before continuing, "We have the strongest launch line-up of any console we've ever created, and we have 140 games in development." →

Below Launch titles are rarely remembered with much fondness, and it appears both Sony and Microsoft are conscious of that in their launch choices.







“Our focus was to create a console that could legitimately be called 'by game creators for game creators' with the ultimate intent of having that rich line-up of games available on the platform”

Mark Cerny, Lead System Architect




EVERY XBOX ONE UNIT CAN BE USED AS A DEVELOPMENT KIT, TOO, WHICH COULD BE A BIG DEAL

Discuss

➔ **DUE FOR RELEASE** this November, the PS4 is leading the reignited console war between Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo. Where that war was once fought on a battleground of graphical and processing power, 2013 has shown that social networks and emergent game design is just as, if not more, important than raw graphical fidelity – not that Sony is dropping the ball in that area of design. "I believe the performance is very important. We had a very specific performance target. We worked quite hard for over five years to achieve that target. The question you asked though is what the benefit is of being the most powerful console on the market?" considers Cerny, adding, "We set the target at ten times the previous generation because we believed that was where we needed to be to meet the expectations of the playing public. And I'm very glad we set [it] that high."

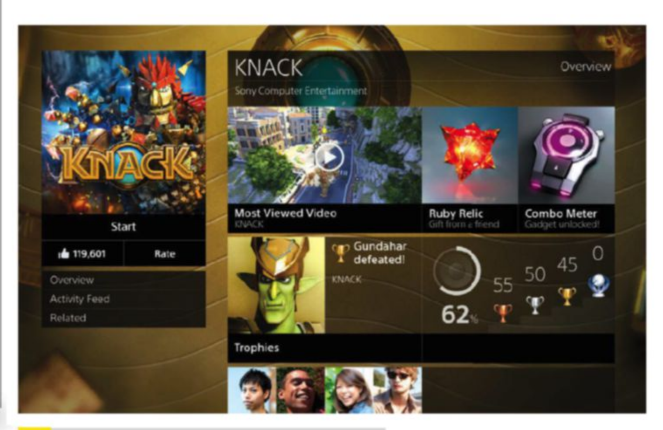
One of Cerny's key roles was to ensure that the hardware and software divisions within Sony were united in order to avoid the problems that plagued the PlayStation 3 launch – widely renowned as being a difficult machine to develop for. Cerny noted how Sony faced internal struggles to unite the disparate divisions, which led to a snub of third-party developers, hence the 'weak line-up' over the PS3 launch window. "Our feeling was that EA and Rockstar better watch out. This was, of course, completely the wrong attitude. We were thinking about our games and not the platform," said Cerny, explaining that by the time the company realised it should share its 'proprietary first-party tools' with third-party developers, it was too late for them to get to grips with the console's 'puzzling' Cell processor.

There is a notable shift from this attitude now, with Cerny later telling **games™** that the shift is already bearing positive results as Sony adopt "supercharged PC architecture" that developers will find easy to learn, but difficult to master. "We'd seen on PS3 that if the hardware is tricky to use, there's quite a learning curve and that the initial games are not what one would hope they might be. So we came out of that with a hardcore commitment that with PS4 we would make hardware that would be much more familiar and accessible."

"I think we are already seeing the benefits from that strategy. Our strategy was the Nolan Bushnell quote – easy to learn, difficult to master. So the idea was very familiar and accessible architecture for year one, but then a very rich feature set that the programmers can learn and explore for year three or year four. What we're seeing now is the benefit. We have games that are coming over to the platform that otherwise would have stayed on PC," he says, adding, "The flipside of that coin is that you must then have something for programmers to dig into in the later years of the console, because you need the console to grow with the evolution of games. That's where all of the customisation we did to the GPU for the sake of asynchronous fine-grade compute comes in."

Above Not every title has to be giant-sized on PS4, and *Knack* is an example of that.

> "We set the target at ten times the previous generation because we believed that was where we needed to be to meet the expectations of the playing public"
>
> Mark Cerny, Lead System Architect



Below You'll be seeing a lot of this screen come November, we suspect.

Left The Xbox One faltered in its initial unveiling, which allowed Sony to take an easy early advantage. Sony will have to work hard to maintain that.

➔ WOW SUBSCRIBER NUMBERS FALL AGAIN TO A STILL IMPRESSIVE 7.7 MILLION USERS

IN BRIDGING THE hardware and software teams, Cerny explains that this will have repercussions across the entire system. He noted how the DualShock 4 controller was a response to the criticism levelled at its predecessor. "The controller was a very, very broad collaboration… We looked at everything we could put into the controller and solicited feedback from the teams on what we should include," says Cerny. "And then because first-person shooters are very important to us, we went to key teams who make the best of the best and we got their specific feedback on trigger springiness, concavity or convexity of joysticks and deadzones, and tuned the controller through a succession of prototypes to what it is today."

Cerny's influence doesn't end with hardware; it's his voice we can hear pushing independent games to the forefront of the PlayStation experience. Where Sony used to be represented by platformers, banner mascots and unique experiences, that ideal seems to have fallen by the wayside as gamers hunger for photorealistic entertainment. Cerny recognises the worth in both, however, and hopes to bring about a renaissance of sorts through indie developers.

"PSone and PS2 definitely led with character action games. With PS3, there was a shift towards more realistic entertainment. I'm hoping we can get a bit closer to where we were. And it isn't that heavy content like *Skyrim* or *Assassin's Creed* isn't great stuff, [but] there's a place for smaller, lighter experiences. *Knack* is a part of that, and with all of these small teams, we're going to see a number of games that show that kind of old school fun," says Cerny, noting, "I think part of the key appeal of PlayStation is the variety of experiences on the platform. The larger titles will be there, but it also means that to the extent that we can bring those smaller but equally compelling experiences to the platforms will see the console experience become richer."

"One of the things I like about indie is it presents more options for the development community. You could be somebody who had been working on PC or a small team… but you could also be somebody who is on these 100-person teams doing specialised work… You can have that same experience as a developer that most of us had in 1994 or 1996 in the early days of PlayStation."

At its core, that's the leading ideal behind Sony's next-gen system – to return to the glory days of the PlayStation brand. The PS4 boasts more powerful architecture and stronger triple-A and independent line-ups than either of its competitors, and it's Cerny's influence that is leading Sony into a favourable position for when the PS4 and Xbox One launch later in the year.

MAKING A NEXT-GEN GAME

→ Mark Cerny dives into next-gen software development



[1] VARIED LAUNCH LINE-UP

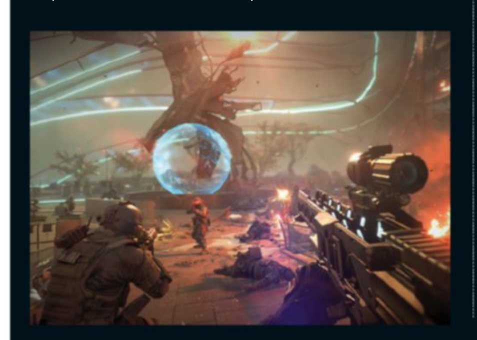
■ What better way to know the PlayStation 4 inside out than to leap back into development for it? Cerny is putting his talent where his mouth is as he collaborates with Japan Studio on launch title *Knack*. "Game development on PlayStation 4 is easier than it has been on other platforms. *Knack* is not a large title, but because the hardware was this supercharged PC architecture we were also able to try out ideas much more easily than we could have on other architectures. If we had some concept like making a character based on 5,000-part physics, we could put that into practice without that much effort."

[2] UTILISING A TALENTED TEAM

■ Japan Studio is behind some of Sony's most expressive games, so it's no surprise to see that Cerny, who is fluent in Japanese, working with the team while in the country to continue his architect duties. "That's the studio [responsible for] *Ico*, *Shadow Of The Colossus*, *LocoRoco* and a number of other titles. My team in particular, the two top leads worked on *Ape Escape* back in the day. That was their first project in the early PlayStation One years, so they are definitely old-school character action fans. We [also] have the lead background artist from *Shadow Of The Colossus*, so he designed our rather soft world look."

[3] WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

■ Post launch, Cerny is reluctant to talk about what the future has in store. "It's hard to say. I really enjoy talking to the developers and there's definitely a place for that going forward as part of the Sony Computer Entertainment family. But it does seem as if I'll be spending more time on game development after the launch," he says, adding. "Personally, I'm intrigued by this wave of very well-appreciated smaller content. I'm fascinated by the number of awards that *The Walking Dead* won, and it's a consensus that *Journey* is game of the year." Might he make an indie game in the future? "Anything is possible," he smiles.





→ SOCIAL GAME GIANT ZYNGA'S DAILY USER NUMBERS FALL BY ALMOST HALF IN THE PAST YEAR →



Right *Splinter Cell* has now become a game dedicated to delivering a fast and furious stealth experience

(RUNNING FROM THE PAST)

Splinter Cell: Reinvented

→ Sam Fisher might not be the man we recognise from 2002, when his stealth debut forever changed that genre, but as Ubisoft Toronto continue to iterate the franchise, is Splinter Cell too far removed from the aspects that defined its initial popularity?

Sam Fisher is weary. We've seen Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell* evolve significantly since 2005's Xbox effort *Chaos Theory*, with *Double Agent* and *Conviction* taking the series' core mechanics further from familiarity and towards a stealth/action hybrid. The shift certainly divided fans, but the move was Ubisoft declaring to the gaming public that pure stealth experiences had to adapt to the modern age, for better or worse. *Blacklist* serves only to highlight this state of affairs, with the opportunity to execute carefully considered sneaking tactics further undermined by the predator and confrontational gameplay styles that have been consistently refined. You might not like it, but Sam Fisher has become more versatile than ever, and he handles fantastically because of it.

Blacklist is set to be the final *Splinter Cell* game to appear on current-gen systems; welcomed news as the modified Unreal engine clearly begins to struggle under the weight of Ubisoft Toronto's ambition. A direct sequel to *Conviction*, this instalment sees Sam leading the newly formed Fourth Echelon against a global threat, letting players seamlessly drop in and out of single, co-operative and spy vs mercenaries modes at the press of a button.

Having an adaptable master spy out in the field holds its share of benefits. With Fisher forgoing the traits that he swore by back in 2002, he's instead taking influence from Jason Bourne's school of espionage. The iconic whir of night vision goggles activating has become nothing more than faithful fan-service; the last thing a terrorist is likely to see is that of a Kevlar suited man sprinting madly into the open, blasting precision headshots, rather than a three-pronged green light floating in the shadows.

Above While a pure sneaking tactic is an option, Sam can now tackle missions with speed or combat effectiveness in mind. In fact, you'll quickly find yourself avoiding slow shimmying across ledges in favour of sprinting across pipes and executing enemies with finesse

If you've ever been a fan of the series, it's not worth counting Sam Fisher out entirely. If you want to return to the glory days of being detected and having to hit restart, then there is a difficulty mode that promotes unforgiving gameplay loops. *Splinter Cell* has become a game dedicated to delivering a fast and furious stealth experience. An alarm being raised doesn't *need* to signal failure, but instead another chance to prove your adaptability.

After everything Sam knew crumbled, after his daughter was kidnapped and presumed dead, in the face of yet another almost unstoppable terrorist plot, the transition to next-generation might be just the refresher Fisher needs. Until then, however, Ubisoft Toronto's lead game designer Laurent Malville talks us through his final current-gen gambit.

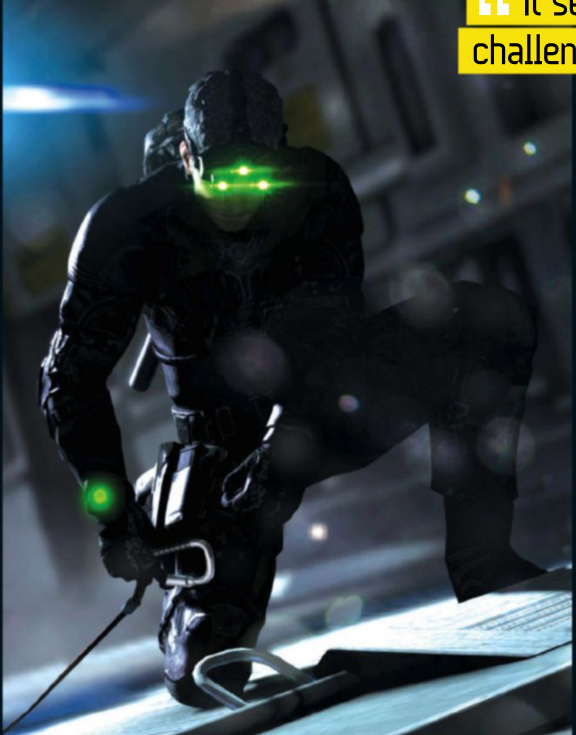
***Splinter Cell: Blacklist* is set to follow *Conviction* in narrative, but how did you approach the design? Sam Fisher is more fluid than we've ever experienced him before – was this a conscious move to diversify the *Splinter Cell* experience?**

Yes, yes, it really was. When we started the game we had a design team in Toronto and it was literally like 28 people at the beginning, not even a coffee machine. All we had were desks and big open spaces, and we had to start thinking about what we were going to do. We'd been reading every single review of *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, because we wanted to understand what people liked and what they wanted for the future. We'd been spending a lot of time on the forums trying to understand why fans were so vocal about the things they thought were missing from the game. After doing the big analyses – and literally we had a big excel file with over 80 reviews –we started to define what would be a core pillar of the game design. What we were left with once this was done was: navigation, infiltration and combat.



ACTIVISION IS BRINGING SIX GAMES TO THE WII U THIS YEAR, INCLUDING CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS







So the game has been built around those aspects of the experience?
Those, for me, were the three core pillars defining what would become *Blacklist*. The idea of that system was that every design decision that we take would have us ask ourselves, 'what is this saying to the player? Is this challenging their navigation? Is this challenging their combat?' The way that translates; the dogs for example, is infiltration and navigation. If they smell you and someone else is around he's going to be like, 'Oh, did you smell something, boy?' and then he's coming at you so you have to move. It's infiltration and navigation.

That's basically how we designed the whole game through those pillars; what is it challenging? Those three gameplay pillars, progressively throughout production of the game, became the playstyles. So they became, Ghost, Panther and Assault. Which, to me, is the perfect balance between the root of *Splinter Cell* and the way it has evolved throughout the different games.

Is it difficult to balance those opposing audiences? The wants of old school *Splinter Cell* players, who are after a pure stealth experience, versus those who are engaged by combat or looking to be adaptable under pressure.
It was tough, but we have a great team. There are a lot of details in the game that I could talk to you about for hours. For example, and it's a stupid thing, but if you open a door that was closed before and haven't yet been detected – if an AI sees it he will say something like, 'was that door open before?' It seems like nothing, but it is challenging yourself suddenly. Even closing and opening a door can have a consequence.

Mark and Execute for example, has great mechanics and we've been expanding on it. We wanted to keep it because people seemed to like it, and it was great because we managed to convince people it wasn't a cheap tactic. One of the things I'm most proud of is it's really the player's choice. The Mark and Execute that you liked in *Conviction* for example, you'll notice that you have the execute gauge now – but what you can also do, if you mark two guys or three guys and you want to keep your execute token you can run to a guard (behind his back) and press execute on him and then take them down but keep your token and chain [extra kills].



Above Laurent Malvile is the lead game designer at Ubisoft and has been witht he company for over six years in various roles



Left While *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* is a pleasure to play; the engine is clearly beginning to show its age. Graphically, it's just not in line with other Ubi titles across the line.

The Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 are approaching the end of their cycles, are you experiencing any limitations in terms of the hardware?
Actually, what is great about being at the end of a generation is that we actually know what we can push. Of course, there will always be frustration because you would love that thing to be a little more 'x', especially the artists or even on the development side – you'll always have that.

Even at the beginning of the new generation you're going to have this frustration of 'Oh I could have done that'. What I find amazing, being at the end of the generation is that we know this technology. We can spend a lot of time on the design, and making sure we have depth because our team has been working miracles with it. We know the hardware. There have been some incredible games in the last year.

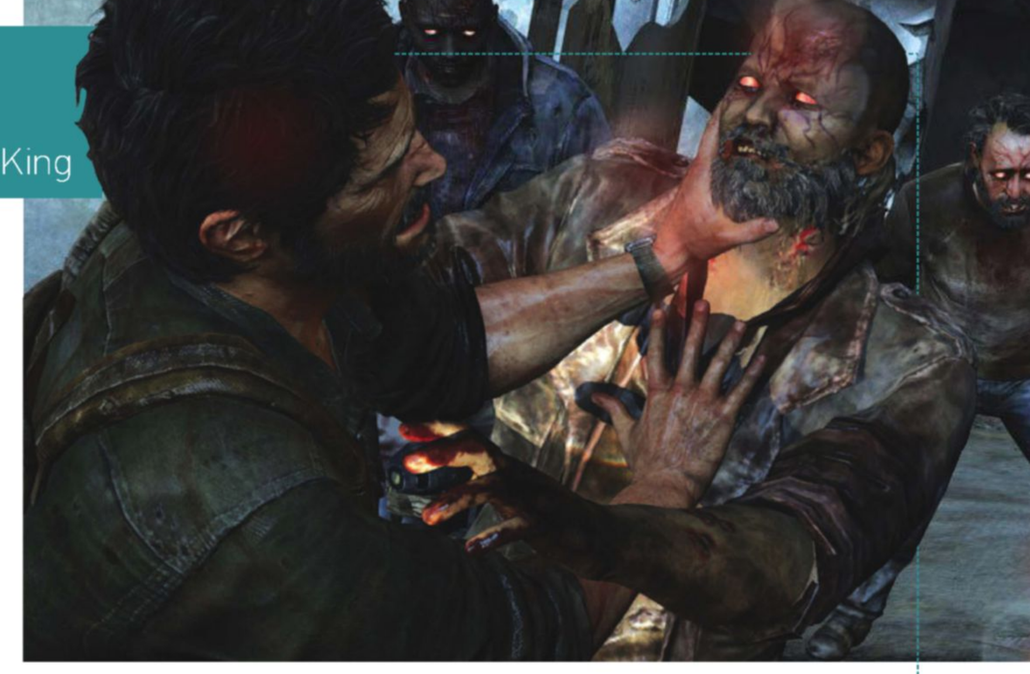
Have you had the opportunity to play around with the Xbox One or PlayStation 4 development kits yet?
I've been really on the project – PS3, Xbox 360. *Blacklist* is finishing in a couple of weeks, and I've seen the presentations like everyone else – but our goal has been to really push for quality on *Blacklist*.

***The Division* was recently announced, set in the shared Tom Clancy universe. As it is set in a mid-crisis environment, that would infer that agencies like Fourth Echelon and Rainbow Six have failed in their duty to shield society. How would Sam Fisher live and operate in that sort of world?**
That is a very good question, but I'm not sure I have an answer for you on this one. Sam Fisher is the best elite spec-ops agent in the world, in the Tom Clancy universe. I'm pretty sure he would know how to handle himself in the situation. He's a born survivor, he's been proving it in the past – even in *Conviction* where he was left on his own - he would handle the situation.

EIDOS MONTREAL FOUNDER STEPHANE D'ASTOUS LEAVES SQUARE ENIX, CITES 'IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES'

#TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



Everything Must Go



Sometimes, when there's nothing better to do on a Tuesday night having already watched *Border Security* and eaten a microwave lasagne for one (don't feel bad for me! *Border Security* is awesome), it's fun to browse through the Xbox Live store. I realise we may have differing definitions of fun here but really, it's all about the bizarre games Microsoft has tried to bury in the indie section – games like *Who Did I Date Last Night*, *Fireplace* and *The Manly Game For Manly Men.*

And really, that aimless digital browsing is the only reason I noticed something over on Xbox Live Arcade that quietly squeaked onto the service without much fanfare. *Space Shooter Bundle* is a shoot-'em-up compilation containing *Radiant Silvergun*, *Ikaruga*, *Sine Mora* and *Fusion: Genesis* for 1600 Microsoft Points. Besides *Fusion: Genesis*, which is only worth playing for the initial novelty of a Sagat look-a-like giving you orders, that compilation is just brilliant value. So before I go any further, buy it. It's worth it for *Ikaruga* and *Radiant Silvergun* alone.

Space Shooter Bundle is part of a new trend that's been taking place on Xbox Live Arcade. Scroll back further and you'll find bundles for NinjaBee, 'Action-Packed' and Twisted Pixel games, all offering similar deals. This isn't an unusually generous move on Microsoft's part but something of a clearance sale. Xbox One has no backwards compatibility with XBLA titles, so Microsoft is slashing prices to squeeze the last drops of profit from those games before the herd packs its bags and migrates to next-gen territory. It makes sense.

What's the rush in moving to next-gen at all?

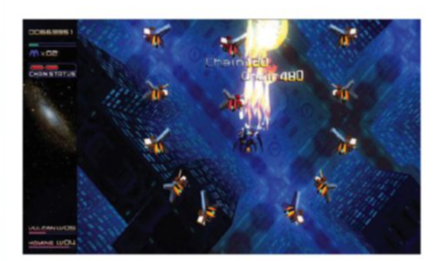
But it also makes you wonder – what's the rush in moving to next-gen *at all*? Xbox One has been defined by its struggles thus far, not just with DRM but also to sell the next-gen experience to those interested, to tell us how it'll really blow away what Xbox 360 could do. It's why we have fluff like the power of the cloud mantra being repeated ad nauseum by Microsoft execs. It's easier to sell unproven concepts like the infinite power of the cloud than it is to sell us another *Forza* (Drivatar!), another *Dead Rising* (Smartglass airstrikes!) or, god forbid, *Ryse*.

This isn't a problem exclusive to Microsoft either. Sony has struggled with the exact same thing on PS4, with *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *Driveclub* leading an underwhelming launch line-up, particularly when you consider PS3 has just seen *The Last Of Us* and has *Beyond: Two Souls* still to come. Is it fair to compare end-of-life PS3 games to start-of-life PS4 games? Perhaps it isn't, perhaps it isn't but either way, the comparison highlights that PS4 isn't offering a compelling reason to upgrade. If anything, that weakness has been covered up by Sony's major PR points scored at Microsoft's expense and extensive indie support. *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* is probably the PS4 game I'm most excited about right now, which speaks volumes.

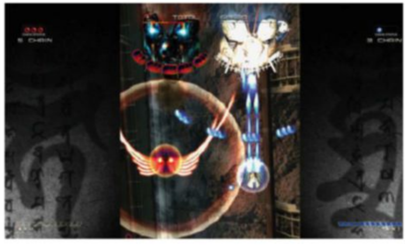
Of course, the majority will make the leap to next gen sooner or later. Xbox 360 and PS3 support will dry up. Those on your Friends List will be seen more often on Xbox One and PS4 titles. Servers for older games will begin closing down. The real next-gen experiences – the *Destiny*s, the *Metal Gear*s, and so on – will also come calling and they should provide a bigger insight into what to expect from next-gen, particularly when it comes to blending dynamic multiplayer experiences into the structure and spectacle of a single-player game.

But bizarrely, this could be the best time to be a gamer in the transition between hardware cycles. As things stand, we're spoilt for choice. There's been an embarrassment of riches over the course of this generation and only those with infinite money and infinite time will have played them all. The slashed prices solve the money issue and time is on our side because as said before, why rush into next-gen? We've got all the games we need now and while Microsoft and Sony activate 'everything must go' mode, we'll be getting them cheaper than ever before.

Radiant Silvergun has lasted 15 years, and there's no reason games like that can't keep us entertained for at least one or two more while next-gen consoles find their identity and finally provide us with a compelling reason to upgrade.



■ There's no way you've cleaned up everything on your existing consoles. What's the rush?



■ *Ikaruga* is finally available at a reasonable price on Xbox Live Arcade.

Ryan King is editor of



The world's first endless action RPG



(A DROP IN THE OCEAN)

Leaving SimCity

→ Former Maxis employees Ocean Quigley, Andrew Willmott and Dan Mokowitz departed the SimCity studio to form new indie outfit Jellygrade. Ex-SimCity creative director and art director Ocean Quigley discusses laying the foundations for a new type of simulation

Can you discuss the sequence of events that led to the three of you leaving Maxis?
We've all been leads on a number of large-scale, multi-year triple-A productions, *SimCity* being the most recent. These big projects are great in a lot of ways – you get to build something really ambitious and to direct the efforts of lots of talented people. But they have their downsides too – they can get bureaucratic, and the joy of creation can get lost in simply keeping them running. And giant triple-A projects aren't really a great place for experimentation and innovation – the costs are just too high.

At heart, all three of us really love making games. We want to make new things that haven't been seen before, and we wanted the creative control that comes from not taking a paycheck. After *SimCity* shipped, we looked around and decided that this was as good a time to take the leap as any.

The three of you have worked together for a long time – when did you start conceiving this new project? When did the idea to start a studio come together?
We'd casually talked about starting a studio together, but didn't get serious about it until after *SimCity* shipped. It's exciting of course, to be leaving the security and comfort of a big stable company and heading out into the unknown, but I can't think of any other people I'd rather do this with.

What excites you most about moving away from big studio development, and what are the positive and negatives that you foresee this opportunity will present?
The most exciting thing (and in fact the primary reason to do it) is the creative freedom that it gives us. We don't have to clear our ideas with anybody! And we don't need to get anybody's permission. After working in a big corporation, that's liberating! The downside is that we have to do everything ourselves; we don't get the leverage that a big studio provides, nor are we getting paid!


Above Andrew Willmott departs Maxis alongside Quigley.


Above Dan Mokowitz was part of the SimCity team.

Why are you focusing on tablets? Is this where you consider the future of gaming?
I don't think that there's only one "future of gaming". There's certainly going to be space for developers and games on PC's, mobile, web, consoles and who knows where else. We just think that tablets are a fun place to experiment, and that the touch interface gives some exciting new dimensions to the kinds of simulations that we're interested in.

The App stores are becoming harder and harder markets to infiltrate with greater success, how are you alleviating this risk?
At the moment, our main concern is to make something wonderful, not to worry about marketing strategies. We'll certainly tell people about what we're doing, but the emphasis has to be on the game, not on user acquisition.

You said that the messy launch of *SimCity* made leaving Maxis easier; what was the general internal attitude over at Maxis surrounding the negativity of *SimCity*'s launch?
I'd say that we were all frustrated at the infrastructural failures that kept people from playing this game that we'd put so much into.

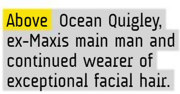
→ TEARAWAY ON VITA WILL NOW LAUNCH A MONTH LATER THAN PLANNED, WILL ARRIVE ON 22 NOVEMBER

Would you consider a server-side always-online system for anything you might develop at Jellygrade, or have the issues surrounding *SimCity* put you off setting up a system in this way?
We're great fans of an online connection supporting the game rather than being a requirement. On mobile you can't rely on a connection anyway. Regardless, there's still no online component to the first game we are making.

With your combined videogame industry experience you could gain a lot of traction on Kickstarter, is this a route you have planned? How do you hope to fund Jellygrade's games?
From talking with others, running a proper Kickstarter campaign is incredibly time-consuming. Right now, the project is in a special state where we're still discovering new dynamics inside the simulation. We don't want to disrupt that. Our current strategy is to deliver appropriately sized chunks of gameplay for a three-person team, rather than promising the kitchen sink up front.

We've seen no shortage of simulation titles in recent years, across a variety of genres. In your opinion, what do sim games need to progress and stay relevant in the future?
Take advantage of the CPU/GPU in a novel way. Every generation, processors improve such that previously non-realtime techniques become viable in realtime. Give players a new experience, playing with a system they've never been able to interact with before. Then give the player their motivations and hang a game around that. We think the genre is alive and well!



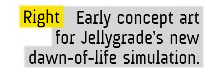

Above Ocean Quigley, ex-Maxis main man and continued wearer of exceptional facial hair.

You've said that your first title will be "a simulation about the dawn of life on earth; about lava, water, rock and the emergence of the first primordial creatures." How will this differ from games like *Spore* and *From Dust*?
There are some common themes, but we're focused on a much more literal representation of the geologic development of the earth. A lot of the science is fascinating, and it'd be great to inspire people to learn more about it.

Will Jellygrade solely produce simulation games, or is there a scope for expanding into other genres?
We are sticking with simulation games for the foreseeable future!






Right Early concept art for Jellygrade's new dawn-of-life simulation.



Above While no release date has been set, Jellygrade's new sim is set for iPad.





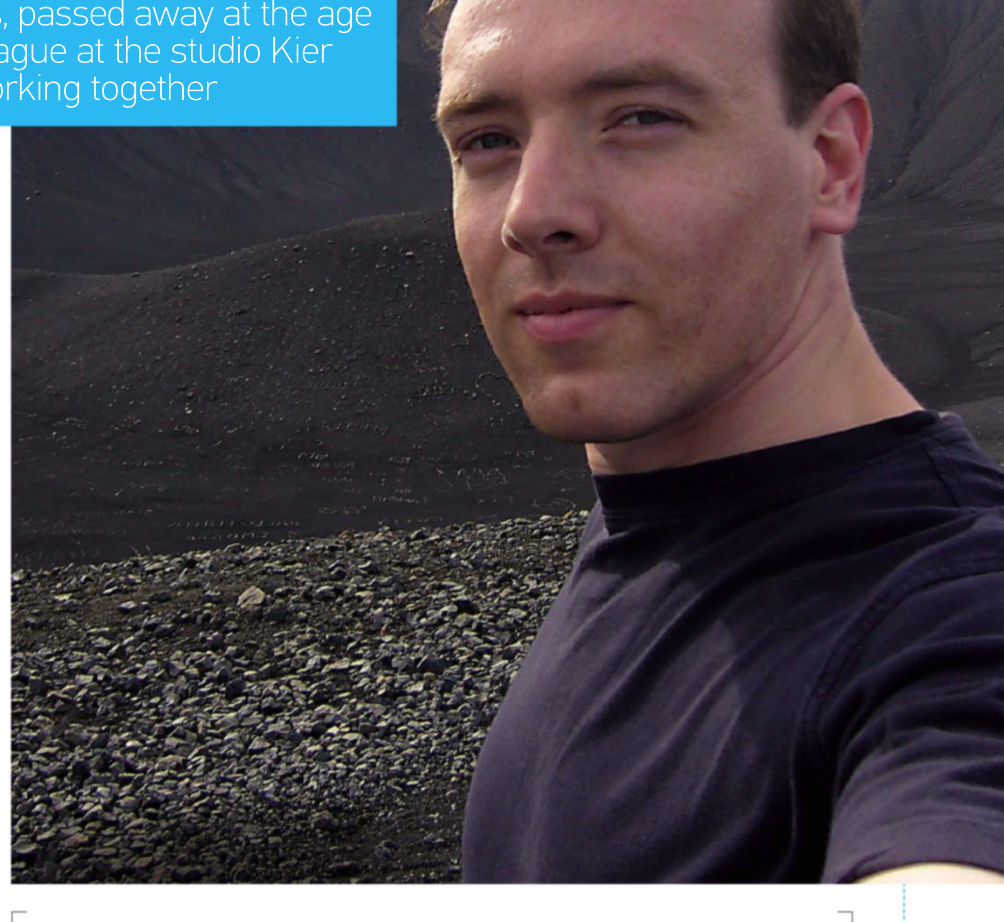
> "After Sim City shipped, we looked around and decided that this was as good a time to leap as any"
> Ocean Quigley, Jellygrade

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV DISCOVERY MULTIPLAYER MODE UNVEILED, IT'S STORY-BASED CO-OP



REMEMBERING ED CLAY

On 19 April, Edmund Clay, an admired lead programmer at PGR studio Bizarre Creations, passed away at the age of 39. Here, his friend and colleague at the studio Kier Storey reflects on their time working together



Ed Clay was revered at Bizarre Creations. I first met Ed was when I worked with him to integrate his PGR Racing Dynamics into the Blur/Blood Stone engine. I had never spoken to him before and his reputation as a one-man coding machine sounded intimidating at first. Any concerns I had were immediately allayed because he turned out to be one of the most modest people I have ever worked with. He entered into the collaboration with no signs of arrogance and was helpful and patient. He would sit attentively listening to my endless jabbering, utter a few softly-spoken words and then return to his code. Any disagreements would be voiced through a subtle use of a raised eyebrow and a shake of his head. We carried on like this for weeks until he warmed to me. He spoke so quietly that I had to crane my neck to hear but I was delighted to discover he had a razor-sharp deadpan sense of humor.

Ed was a perfectionist. His code was always impeccably structured and formatted but his talents were not limited to programming. I later discovered that he also provided numerous design suggestions that we rolled with. In addition, he had created several successful games as a one-man indie developer, had obtained a PhD in particle physics at CERN and was a talented musician having composed his own music. He was so modest that he never mentioned any of these things to me.

It was amusing to observe other people's interactions with Ed. For example, our testers would usually approach most programmers confidently, declaring "You've got a bug" or "Your system's broken… again". However, when approaching Ed, they would meekly crouch by his desk and ask if it was a bug or a feature. This was not due to Ed's demeanor so I can only assume it was due to the sheer rarity of his code containing bugs.

At one point, he told me one of his secrets to making sure that games were as polished as they could be. This came about after production refused to let me fix a bug I found late in a project. I was furious at the decision so he explained how this was actually all my fault. I made the rookie mistake of writing a system which "failed silently". I should have engineered the system to crash as soon as it was misused. Nobody ignores a crashing system but production regularly blocks fixing minor bugs so transform minor bugs into showstoppers!

> He turned out to be one of the most modest people I have ever worked with… with no signs of arrogance, he was helpful and patient

At his funeral, a table full of tech programmers recalled one occasion where Ed delivered a presentation about a template library he designed. Everyone sat as close to him as possible. As expected, he started very quietly, then cracked a joke about sandwiches and proceeded to deliver the presentation at his full-volume voice; something which almost nobody, including myself, had heard him use before or since.

Ed worked on the PGR series, The Club, 007: Blood Stone and Blur at Bizarre.



ED'S BROTHER, JOHN CLAY, RECALLS HIS EARLY PROGRAMMING YEARS

■ ED BEGAN PROGRAMMING on an Amiga 500 at the age of 15, and quickly became part of the golden age of 16-bit home programming. Inspired by the point-and-click adventures of the day, his first released game was *Starbase 13*, a 1992 shareware release that earned rich praise from magazine reviewers and quickly topped the Public Domain sales chart. Over the next few years Ed released more adventures, each more impressive than the last. He was a one-man programming team, doing all of the graphics, sound, design and coding from scratch – amazingly, at the same time as pursuing a PhD in particle physics at UCL and CERN.

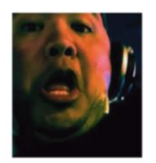
With his final Amiga work Ed moved into 3D, coding a first-person shooter engine that pushed the machine to its limits. Undeterred by the demise of his beloved Amiga platform in the late Nineties, Ed made the transition to PC coding. On the strength of his online portfolio (still accessible at dto-software.freeservers.com), right after completing his PhD, he was offered a position at Bizarre Creations.

GAME DEV STORY

with Q-Games' James Mielke



Keeping the PlayStation brand portable in the next generation



You'd be amazed at the longevity of the PlayStation Portable in Japan. Long considered 'dead' in the west, Sony's venerable PSP continues to thrive on its home turf, with new releases hitting shelves every month for the system. Sure, some of these games are of the visual novel variety, but major releases still hit every few months, games like Koei's *Monster Hunter*-styled *Toukiden*, Konami/tri-Ace's *Frontier Gate Boost+*, and other genre staples. It's a viable system, with an installed base in the tens of millions here in Japan, having succeeded thanks to the *Monster Hunter* franchise, which has itself since moved on to other platforms like the 3DS. Although sales of both the hardware and the software have certainly slowed down, it brings to mind Sega's Dreamcast; a system that continues to live on long after its sell-by date.

The PSP always managed to strike the balance between gaming portability and celebrity chic. While this seems like a stretch of the imagination, in Japan one would regularly see variety shows on TV with a panel of pop star hosts, all playing *Monster Hunter* wirelessly, as the phenomenon approached Starcraftian levels of hype. On the typical Japanese train, you could see a dozen PSPs in any direction, most often among trend-conscious school kids, of course, but also in the hands of salarymen and club girls in their twenties. For a time it was considered uncool to be seen with a 'kids' console, like a Nintendo DS, at least in public. Clearly the momentum has shifted with Nintendo's 3DS – a once-maligned but now resurgent platform, thanks to a timely price drop and the eventual arrival of software reinforcements.

> The Vita was truly poised to carry the baton from the PSP into the next gen. But so many funny things happened on the way to the coming out party

Still, despite the PSP's ability to hang on, and the fact that the newest games still look as good as anything on the 3DS, its days are numbered, and that means Sony's underperforming Vita is going to have to pick up the slack. When the system was announced, its specs were impressive. Although the PSP once promised many things, it really wasn't ever going to be a PS2 to go. The Vita, however, with its beautiful OLED screen, touch controls, dual analog sticks, expandable memory storage, wifi and 3G connectivity, and improved integration with the PSN storefront, was truly poised to carry the baton from the PSP into the next gen. But so many funny things happened on the way to the handheld's coming out party.

The most egregious gut punches came at the hands of Nintendo. Every move Nintendo made leading up to the Vita's launch – namely, swiping *Monster Hunter*'s allegiance, that price drop, making sure *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* hit streets just before the Vita, etc – was deliberate and calculated. After all, the PSP was the one handheld to ever enter Nintendo's most uncontested turf and eat its lunch, for years on end. Nintendo desperately needed to reclaim its territory, as their subsequent failures with the Wii U have only served to reinforce. But the other irrefutable factor was the emergence of smartphone gaming. Sony was launching its admittedly value-packed new handheld at a – at its announcement – surprisingly low price, especially considering the guts of the hardware. But when gamers had all manner of low priced options available to them on their iPhones, would there still be a dedicated audience willing to shell out money for a bona fide next-gen portable gaming system, with games that cost almost as much as full-fledged console games?

The answer of course, as we have seen, has been "not that many," but like the PSP, there continues to be a strong roll-out of Vita games in Japan, and on PSN in the west. Indie games, like *Hotline Miami* and *Guacamelee* are perfect for the system, while *Earth Defence Force*, *Valhalla Knights 3*, and Vanillaware's upcoming boobfest *Dragon's Crown* will have hit retail by the time you read this. And the games keep on coming. That's the thing; the games keep coming. Not big games, perhaps, but I've already got over two dozen keepers in my Vita game case, and to me that says the Vita has earned its money.

James Mielke is a producer at Q-Games



THE ONES TO WATCH

■ IF YOU'RE on the fence about whether to buy a PS Vita, it's arguable that there are already enough quality games on there to warrant a regret-free purchase, especially considered the access to so many of the older PSone and PS2 games. But if you would still like something to look forward to, here's a short list of some of the games that are in the mail. *Tearaway* (Media Molecule's new platforming wonder), *Killzone Mercenary* (looks hot, and has stealth elements), *Dragon's Crown* (sidescrolling art-fest hack n slasher), and *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD*. Then, games like *Terraria*, *Batman Arkham Origins: Blackgate*, and a port of *Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two* are en route to flesh out that Vita library. Plus, music, movies, Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, and web browsing to go? That's a powerful package, and one to entice fence-sitters.



Strider Returns In 2014

→ The original ninja makes his way back to consoles

It seems that PlayStation 4 and Xbox One have opened the floodgates for all manner of retro revivals recently. The latest of which is Capcom's *Strider* – an early arcade hit for the publisher in 1989 – which finds its way onto Sony and Microsoft's new consoles, as well as current-gen systems, later in the year. Double Helix, the developer behind *Silent Hill: Homecoming* and the impending *Killer Instinct*, is co-developing the title, working alongside the original's creative leads located in Capcom's Osaka office. And it's the latter point, not the former, that provides *Strider* with some credibility. Hiryu returns with his trademark sword, the Cypher, augmented by various abilities that unleash attacks and enable the ninja to progress further through each level. It lends the gameplay a Metroidvania flavour, demonstrating a desire to tweak the original's formula rather than rehashing its most iconic moments. But for many, the very fact that the legendary ninja will be returning in the first place is more than enough reason to celebrate.



The quality of next-gen games

➔ Xbox One and PS4 are on their way, but was there really anything new or exciting about the games revealed alongside them? We let you decide.

■ I guess the question is, what will be added in addition to just fancier graphics? Bigger multiplayer battles? Truly innovative gameplay? (and a Kinect that doesn't suck). **Mark Gregory, Facebook**

■ They look like current games except with slightly better aesthetics. Predictable. Anybody looking for innovation in a market where games cost millions to make in this current economic climate will be sorely disappointed... **Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook**

■ I'm really looking forward to playing *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *Killzone: Shadow Fall* on PS4. I have high hopes next-gen technology will allow developers to create much more advanced in-game AI, which will hopefully see smarter in-game characters and worlds to explore. **Adrian Fisher, Facebook**

■ Shinier visuals aren't really inspiring me. I'd rather play the current crop of excellent 3DS games than buy a PS4 at the moment. **Tony Ryan, Facebook**

■ Please let everyone know that the Xbox One will not be available in all Europe! Even in all European community! **Miguel Cruz, Facebook**

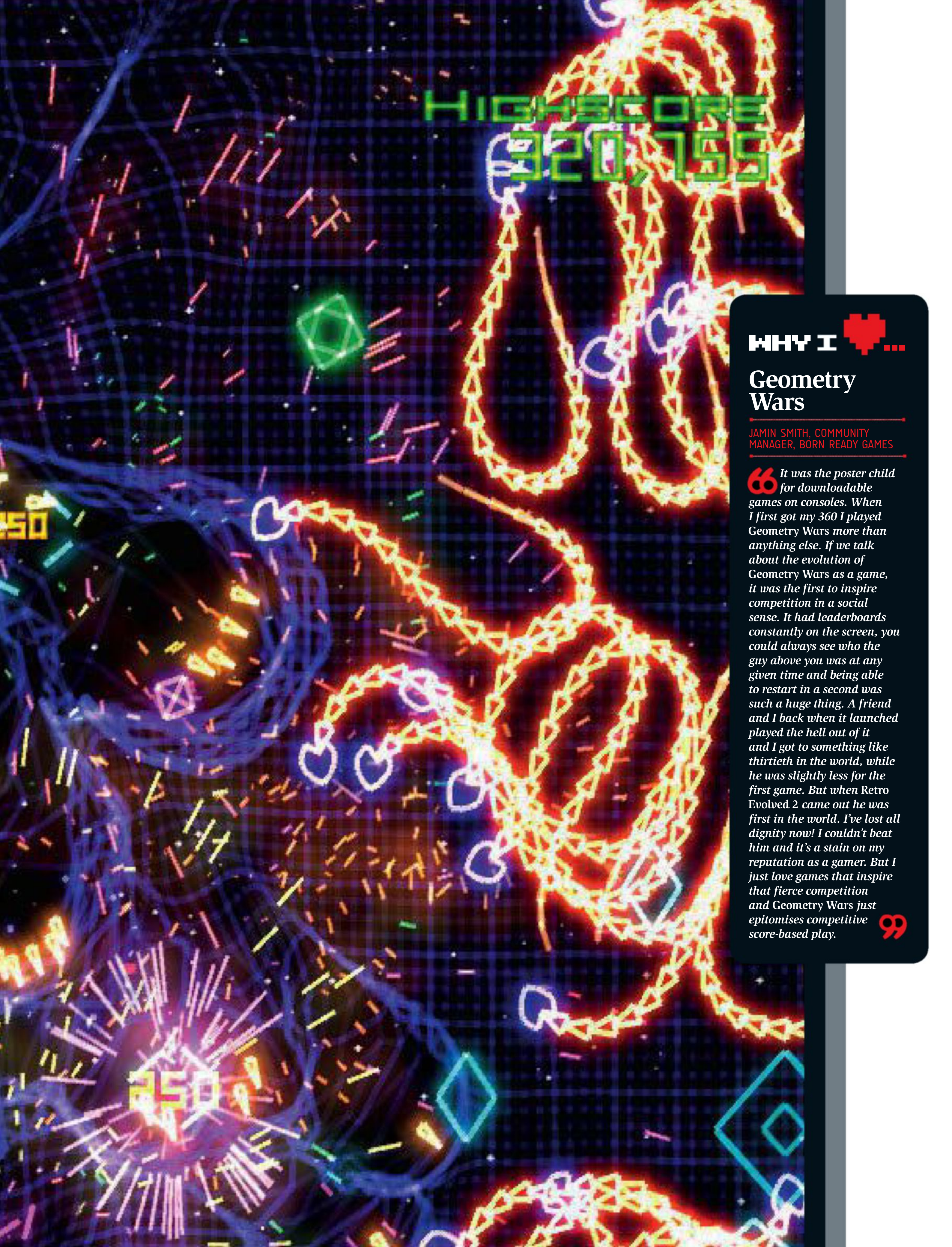
■ The quality will shine in the exclusives. While I'm keen on *FF/KH/Watch Dogs* etc, these games will play/look relatively similar to each other due to them being multi-format. Games like *The Last Of Us/Halo* have set the bar for this gen and will next. **Paul Shulver, Twitter**

■ They look shiny shiny. **Ryan Whitelaw, Facebook**



> "I just love games that inspire that fierce competition and Geometry Wars just epitomises competitive score-based play"

JAMIN SMITH, BORN READY GAMES



WHY I ♥...

Geometry Wars

JAMIN SMITH, COMMUNITY MANAGER, BORN READY GAMES

“*It was the poster child for downloadable games on consoles. When I first got my 360 I played* Geometry Wars *more than anything else. If we talk about the evolution of* Geometry Wars *as a game, it was the first to inspire competition in a social sense. It had leaderboards constantly on the screen, you could always see who the guy above you was at any given time and being able to restart in a second was such a huge thing. A friend and I back when it launched played the hell out of it and I got to something like thirtieth in the world, while he was slightly less for the first game. But when* Retro Evolved 2 *came out he was first in the world. I've lost all dignity now! I couldn't beat him and it's a stain on my reputation as a gamer. But I just love games that inspire that fierce competition and* Geometry Wars *just epitomises competitive score-based play.*”



BEFORE



AFTER ROCKSTEADY GAVE US THE DEFINITIVE INTERACTIVE BATMAN EXPERIENCE WITH THE ARKHAM FRANCHISE, WARNER BROS HAS BESTOWED ITS BIGGEST LICENCE ON NEW OUTFIT WARNER MONTREAL. AT THE CLIMAX OF THIS GENERATION, CAN THE CAPED CRUSADER SURVIVE ANOTHER NIGHT ON THE STREETS OF GOTHAM? GAMES™ VENTURES TO MONTREAL TO FIND OUT

THE DAWN

With challenge maps accessible from the Batcave, players can brush up on their pugilistic prowess before they hit the streets of Gotham.

GAMES™ CAN'T MISS THE IRONY IN BATMAN. HE'S A CHARACTER THAT SPENDS THE MAJORITY OF HIS TIME LIVING IN THE SHADOWS, BUT REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST RECOGNISABLE FIGURES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION. Likewise, his prowess as an unstoppable entertainment juggernaut transformed the licence videogame from widespread ignominy into an enticing proposition and propelled one London-based studio from complete anonymity to be one of the most venerable and propitious developers in the industry. Reflecting on the momentous achievement of both *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City*, there's little doubt that Rocksteady has cast a long, imposing shadow across the industry, and it's hard to imagine anyone feeling the coldness of shade greater than Warner Bros.' new studio tasked with continuing the interactive legacy of the Dark Knight.

Invited to stamp its own mark on one of the most impressive virtual playgrounds to debut in the last decade, Warner Bros. Games Montreal's *Batman: Arkham Origins* returns to a world seemingly conceived with the medium in mind; marrying convention and commercialism by touting a clutch of iconic characters, an even bigger, next gen-worthy environ and one eponymous hero packing the entirety of MOD's R&D department in one wrist. Distilling the successful formula therefore was paramount to WB Montreal as it strived to both emulate and expand on the principle foundations of the series. One thing we learnt from our time noodling around the studio's headquarters is that it's all about doing the legacy justice.

"The *Arkham* secret sauce is creating this incredibly immersive experience where, from the moment you click start to the moment you pause, you *are* Batman," senior producer Ben Mattes tells **games™**. "Every element, every mechanic, every line of dialogue, every menu – there's careful thought and design to make sure the fourth wall is not broken and that sense of immersion is maintained. The smallest little hiccup, the tone is just a little off, a little goofier and you break that..."

THE JOKER

Alias: Red Hood
Preferred weapon: Explosives

The Joker remains one of the most unpredictable and dangerous criminals operating in Gotham. He appears to have formed an allegiance with Bane.

BANE

Alias: The Masked Man
Preferred weapon: Brute strength

One of the eight assassins hired by Black Mask to kill Batman on the night of Christmas Eve, before he is injected with muscle mass-enhancing Titan formula.



Establishing dichotomy between a night of festive Christmas cheer and abject terror isn't exactly a new storytelling device. Recently, *Iron Man 3* director Shane Black – whose filmography demonstrates a clear fondness for yuletide – mused on setting his own superhero blockbuster around the period, speaking of the themes inherent to the holiday season. "It's a time of reckoning for a lot of people, where you take stock as to where you've been, how you got to where you are now, and the lonely people are lonelier at Christmas." Indeed, isolation, vengeance and penitence haunt *Origins*' early-career Dark Knight.

Set five years before the events of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* on Christmas Eve, reckoning arrives in the form of eight assassins, hired by mobster Black Mask, to take down Batman. It's an apt setting that, as creative director Eric Holmes puts it to **games™**, "is the happiest night of the year in the worst place in the world." But this unhoned, formative Dark Knight also presented an interesting narrative opportunity for WB Montreal to peel back the cowl and delve into Bruce Wayne's scarred psyche. "*Arkham* is a franchise that is known for great stories but it's not a franchise that is known for subtlety," states Holmes, himself no stranger to costumed vigilantes having worked on *Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* and *Prototype*. "The characters are boldly drawn and quite clear but they're not super-nuanced."

It's evident that creating a strong emotional hook is high on the studio's mandate with the prequel. With no Oracle or Robin on his side, and captain Gordon actively pursuing his future confidant,



Batman communicates almost solely with his steadfast butler, Alfred. Therefore, bringing the two closer together was essential, which manifests itself quite literally as *Origins* debuts the Batcave proper as a primary location.

Hanging like blackened teeth from the roof of the cave's mouth, the sea of bats angrily disperses as the Batwing roars through the interior waterfall of Batman's clandestine headquarters. The Batcave is a much larger expanse than the miniature proxy installed beneath Arkham Asylum in the first game. Iconic vehicles stand like trophies on raised platforms, his wardrobe emerges from beneath the thick metallic walkways – enabling player's to switch bonus costumes between missions – and every inch drips with canny references placed for the eagle-eyed – which, aside from a glimpse of a newspaper cutting of the Red Hood spotted in Gotham, proves **games™** most certainly is not. But it also serves as a practical base for Batman to upgrade equipment and polish his abilities. The most notable addition being Challenge Maps, a separate feature of previous entries, now accessible from the Batcave to enable players to get familiar with combat techniques during the campaign.

There's a sense that this all feeds into a crucial flashpoint in Batman's career rarely explored in other mediums. And while we're told in no uncertain terms that this isn't the Batman of *Year One*, his relationship with Alfred is fraught – his custodian not approving of his vigilantism – and there's a pervading notion that this is a more physically and emotionally vulnerable characterisation of the hero. Holmes himself confirms that Batman's physicality is altered to represent this raw incarnation of the character: “Definitely a little bit in the way he fights and the way he's animated,” he says. “We touched up all the animations in the game and have given him more of a sense of energy and athleticism in the fighting.”

Mattes agrees: “You'll definitely feel that ours is the younger, wraithlike, scarier version of that character that intimidates everyone in the city. For many people is just an urban myth; a legend. They don't even know he exists. And if they see him, they wish they hadn't. They'll feel that. Players will definitely come away with that feeling of empowerment that comes with it.”

“But I think the way you'll feel it the most is in the voiceover,” adds Holmes. “Rather than enemies being like ‘There he is – get him!’ they fill their pants when he first appears, and then they'll start rallying, but when there's one guy left he'll try and talk his way out of it. We've tried to add more drama in the voiceover. It feels good to be Batman when the last guy realises that it's not going to end well for him.”

In fact, Holmes insists that *Origins* will utilise the full gamut of Batman's pugilistic and technological prowess to push players beyond simple combos. “He's got the full suite of abilities,” confirms Holmes. “The character is completely functional but he's challenged in new ways by these other characters that turn up. For instance, our bosses have been designed from the ground up to use more of the core mechanics of the game. One of the bosses that we really gravitate towards in *Arkham City* is Mr. Freeze. He was the exam. You think you know how to do this predator gameplay? Well here's the exam. Let's run the test and see if you can do everything. And I remember getting really sweaty palms playing that. It engaged players because as a character he was pushing you and was

RIDDLE ME THIS

Will the connoisseur of conundrums make an appearance in Arkham Origins

The Riddler has been a pervading entity that haunted Batman in both Rocksteady titles to date, but his return is not a given in *Batman: Arkham Origins*. “The thing that Riddler really gave to me in *Arkham City* was ‘Oh I can go do that – it's right there and I can go do that.’ So we want that and you'll get that but it'll have a different form,” says creative director Eric Holmes. The exact form Holmes wouldn't be drawn into saying, but he did confirm that there will be collectable objects hidden across the expanded Gotham City. Senior producer Ben Mattes boasts that it features a wealth of additional content: “I think that there is definitely as much, if not more, meta game content,” he adds.

5 COMICS THAT INFLUENCED BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS

The essential reads behind WB Montreal's tale



BATMAN: YEAR ONE (1987)
Frank Miller/David Mazzucchelli
The Batman in *Arkham Origins* isn't the *Year One* incarnation, but Miller's seminal graphic novel was a key inspiration in establishing the relationships with Gotham's inhabitants.



LEGENDS OF THE DARK KNIGHT (1989)
Dennis O'Neil
An anthology of Batman's early years that interweaves with the *Year One*, *The Legends Of The Dark Knight* is notable for unveiling the origins of Batman's universe.



THE MAN WHO LAUGHS (2005)
Ed Brubaker/Doug ahnke
A one-shot pitched as a spiritual successor to *Year One*, *The Man Who Laughs* reveals Batman's first encounter with The Joker, who goes on a city-wide massacre.



TURNING POINTS (2001)
Greg Rucka/Steve Lieber
A series of Commissioner Gordon stories set during crucial points in his relationship with Batman, *Arkham Origins* is set when Gordon first begins to trust Batman.



THE LONG HALLOWEEN (1996)
Jeph Loeb/Tim Sale
Set on Christmas Eve, focusing on the years before Harvey Dent became Two-Face, Batman runs into the Falcone mob, while battling other popular rogue's gallery villains.



doing so in a way that felt very authentic to Freeze as well. We have approached these characters in a similar way. There will be a couple of exams that you'll encounter along the way involving your other core abilities that'll be… pleasing."



There's a very obvious reason why this chapter in the Arkhamverse is titled *Origins*. As previously stated, it's not a direct origin story for the Caped Crusader, but that it'll introduce the fundamental dynamics that are core to the character. The Joker, Penguin and Bane are among the confirmed adversaries that are set to appear, some of whom aren't quite how you remember them from Rocksteady's two instalments.

"Through the early career setting when we have characters who do return with have an opportunity to refresh them," says Holmes. "You've seen Bane: he doesn't look the same as he has been in the other games. He has transferred back to where his roots come from in 'Vengeance Of Bane' where we see him as a big guy, a muscular guy. He's not yet this deformed character that he becomes based on the experiments done on him with the Titan formula. That's been really fun, rewinding these characters back to where they started."

However, Mattes reiterates that remaining true to the legacy of iconic creations is paramount to the studio's vision. "We focus on relationships," Mattes firmly states. "We talked about the inspiration that we take from *The Legends Of The Dark Knight* from a narrative point of view and what this game is in many ways the origins of some of the most pivotal relationships in the *Batman* canon, which could be argued are among some of the most important relationships in modern entertainment history. For example, the relationship between Alfred and Batman at the beginning of our game and the relationship between Alfred and Batman at the end of to our game evolves so significantly that in many ways it's the origins of the kind of binôme [partnership] that you see there later in the Batman story. What seeds that are planted now that then grow to fruition and become the relationship we know of in *Arkham City*, which is clearly a much more mature relationship with its history. And the years in between us and then are the years that fill that gap."

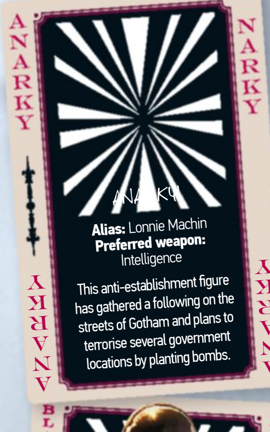
It was slightly different for Holmes, who was galvanised by driving returning characters towards their latter incarnations. "I think what is fun to me is that it's kind of modern mythology," he suggests. "People have a general understanding of who these characters are and what they are – ask any person on the street who Bane is and they're going to know – but what they don't necessarily know is where these guys started.

"That's the fun, the snapping of pieces that we're going to have in our story. 'Oh look, these guys don't get along and we know that they will.' And that's kind of distressing at first but the story starts to resolve these things. That's very satisfying to see that," adds Holmes, clasping his fingers together. So we'll likely see how Penguin got a bottle lodged in his eye socket, the Joker's rise to infamy and perhaps even a glance at a pre-acid bath Two-Face. But another upshot is that it'll enable characters both making their debut and those previously consigned to cameos in the past to take up residency as primary antagonists.

"There were these wonderful early meetings where we had all sorts of characters up on the board that could fit within the narrative of Black Mask," teases Mattes, treading carefully so not to reveal undisclosed characters. "We would start to brainstorm on 'Okay, let's say hypothetically go with this one, what kind of gameplay would this be? What kind of boss fight would this be? Which core Batman ability would this challenge? Okay, yeah, he or she makes the cut. This one? Ah, great character but gameplay-wise we've already got that covered.' There's a very nice process of choosing our roster not purely based off gameplay, not purely based off narrative but finding that dovetailing between the two, so that we're testing, as Eric said, all these key *Batman* gameplay abilities and mechanics, while



In Arkham, a clenched fist trumps weapons.







♠ Bane returns, sans grotesquely enlarged appendages.

BEING BATMAN

Voice actor Roger Craig Smith on his version of the Dark Knight

On how he got the role…
As far as being involved, it was rather uneventful I suppose. Like most projects, it was an audition process – got a call to audition for a secret project, which is fairly typical for most videogames. They don't say, 'Hey, you're going in for Batman!' They say, 'We've got this project we want to bring you in on'. And that's essentially what it was.

On keeping surprises for the finished game…
I can't go in too much [detail] with the version we're doing, but as Eric [Holmes] said at Comic Con, we are so excited for this that we want there to be a lot of surprises. Even when it came to people asking us to do the voices, we thought it best to [leave people] to play around with [*Arkham Origins*].

On emulating Kevin Conroy (or not)…
There's pressure in stepping into the shoes of another unbelievable actor who's done this for so long. Both Troy [Baker] and I were joking, it's like 'Oh I got this role! Oh, I got this role. I've got to make sure I do a really good job here.' And it comes with a lot of pressure. But it wasn't so much that I was trying to do something that was closely tied to Kevin's performance, and it's not to take away from Kevin's performance, but we were doing it as a prequel. It was more about wanting to make sure we knew there was this horizon that we had to take our characters to.

"THIS BATMAN HAS A FEW LESSONS TO LEARN"

On connecting with the other *Arkham* games…
[We had to] set the groundwork for it being believable that this version of Batman or the Joker could become Kevin Conroy or Mark Hamill's versions of the characters, because that's us trying to stay true to the characters just as those talented actors have done before us.

On the younger Batman's state of mind…
With this game being a prequel, maybe this version of Batman has a few lessons to learn. He's more than capable, for sure, that he's early enough in his career we're going to see him struggle with learning those lessons and as Eric said, he's got some growing to do to a certain degree, and it's more about him understanding what it's like to work with other people and that sort of thing.

COPPERHEAD

Alias: Unknown
Preferred weapon: Poisoned claws

Another assassin hired to take down Batman; Copperhead uses her skills as a master contortionist, judo and poison-tipped claws to subdue enemies.

PENGUIN

Alias: Oswald Chesterfield Cobblepot
Preferred weapons: Trick umbrellas

The ruthless underworld criminal is located at Gotham docks where he operates an illegal weapons black market.

also making sure that we've got characters that run the scope narratively of different personalities and styles and behaviours."

However, it could be said that we've already seen the cream of the rogue's gallery to date. With Rocksteady effectively utilising Joker twice over, as well as major appearances of Two-Face, Penguin, Catwoman and Scarecrow, you'd forgive WB Montreal for thinking that Rocksteady had already pinched the best showdowns. Not so according to Holmes: "Oh, I think we'll have a few surprises for people…"



It's arguable that *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* are defined as much about their ability to surprise as they are for delivering on the source material's iconography. The disorientating effect of the fake restart caused by Scarecrow's fear toxin cut through the conventional platforming to offer an abstract, subversive diversion during the campaign. Certainly it's an integral ingredient to the formula that WB Montreal will continue with its own entry. An early Most Wanted scenario – ostensibly side missions concerning popular villains – involves Batman encountering Mad Hatter for the first time, which throws the hero unwittingly into another psychedelic nightmare he must escape.

"We're continuing that tradition that Rocksteady established and added something different," says Holmes. "Clearly Scarecrow was all about fear, terror and horror. Hatter is more psychedelic. It's a bit more 'The walls are melting' than running down the streets screaming. I think it brings diversity. You get to explore part of the character's mind and it's a really nice break from the streets of Gotham that have a very specific feel for them. It lets you hit a different note, have a break. So having abstract sequences allows you to throw the formula over your shoulder – try and predict this."

This particular sequence is perhaps the weirdest Batman has endured throughout the three *Arkham* titles. Hypnotised and cast into an *American McGee*-style Wonderland, the camera flips to a 2.5D platformer perspective, as Batman navigates through the contorted forest scene searching for the kidnapped Alice. Brainwashed goons emerge through mirrors, Batman navigates across a river of tea and later pursues hatter between the cogs of an operating clock. Watching the arresting, unpredictable sequence unfold it becomes clear that the studio is determined to seize ownership over each scenario, however familiar or unfamiliar they be.

"As a team we're definitely attracted to the exotic sequences," says Mattes when we join him and Holmes in the studio's quaint cinema to watch the sequence. "I believe that because of the success of the Scarecrow moment in particular in *Arkham Asylum*, and how inspirational it was for a lot of us when we first played that game, there are other team members that have the same attitude saying 'Wait 'til you see what I can bring to the table with this exotic sequence.'"

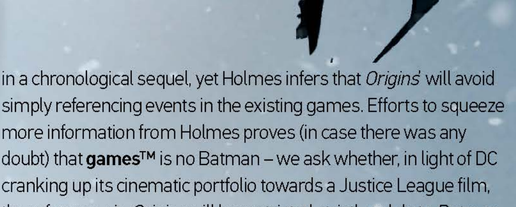
And the fact that these 'surprise' sequences have become a staple of the series doesn't worry Mattes or Holmes in regards to maintaining shock value. "You don't know everything we're doing," smiles Holmes. "I'd be very surprised if you could guess the other ones. There's no way we're revealing the other ones before people get the game in their hands."

"There is more. This is just the one we're showing," continues Mattes. "When this one actually came out… it was a bit of a surprise – a welcome surprise. When this level was in its earliest stages of development, and I remember seeing it for the first time, I was not expecting this Escher-esque sort of world. This psychotropic world is such a wonderful fit for that character but not necessarily what I was expecting. It was *exactly* that moment of surprise for me."

DYNAMIC DUO

Inside Arkham Origins Online

Asymmetrical multiplayer. That's what the confusingly titled *Batman: Arkham Origins Online*, developed by Splash Damage, is about. Confusing because it sounds like a separate purchase (it isn't). Asymmetrical because, beyond mixing it up in traditional team deathmatches between the elite gangs of Joker and Bane, there are the heroes. The heroes are a separate team made up of Batman and Robin, who stalk the two gangs across each arena. Add into that supervillain doors that unleash controllable versions of Joker and Bane, random ammo drops since ammo is severely limited, and a beguiling and wonderful selection of gadget loadouts and you have something really quite unique.



Touring the studio later in the day, **games™** stumbles upon a black and white mural adorning one of the office walls. The implacable stare of Batman overlooks the streets of Gotham in a gloomy homage to *Origins*' tone. We're told that it was painted by a street artist employed to design graffiti across the terrorised in-game city. It's another testament to the almost next-gen levels of attention to detail that WB Montreal is devoting to the project, not taking for granted the foundations built by Rocksteady.

"We're trying to shove the narrative into every pore we can," says Mattes when we bring up our discovery. "I think that's something that's very true of the past games and something we're trying to carry forward. You can look around and trip over story. Whether it's a newspaper headline in the gutter, or some piece of graffiti – it's not just there because someone wanted to put it in, it ties into the world. I think everything we put in there is about expanding that very authentic realisation of Batman and that it feels immersive."

"There has been a fairly obsessive pursuit to put story…" Holmes pauses to consider how much he can reveal, before elaborating on how the studio intends to drive the franchise further in the future. "I would check out every statue in the world, every piece of graffiti, I would check out every handwritten note and newspaper headline you find. We've sown a bunch of our own seeds."

Holmes points to the subtle references to Scarecrow in *Arkham City* as a high watermark for so-called seed sowing – Crane's mask crops up on a rooftop, while a secret barge and conspicuous enemy types suggests the machinations of a revenge plot against the Caped Crusader. Likely these dangling threats will be resolved in a chronological sequel, yet Holmes infers that *Origins*' will avoid simply referencing events in the existing games. Efforts to squeeze more information from Holmes proves (in case there was any doubt) that **games™** is no Batman – we ask whether, in light of DC cranking up its cinematic portfolio towards a Justice League film, the references in *Origins* will be restricted strictly solely to *Batman* lore ("You'll have to play the game to find out," is Holmes' natural response) – but it's clear that *Origins* will chart its own course through the Arkhamverse.





Despite this, there has more than a few snipers prepared to take their shot at *Origins*. No Rocksteady on development. No Paul Dini on scripting. No Kevin Conroy on gravelly voice duties. Current gen, not next gen. But anyone mulishly writing the prequel off merely for what its *not* should reassess their standing. Rocksteady is offering little more than technical assistance but has given the project full backing. "That's the greatest endorsement we can get," says Mattes. "I don't think it's in anyone's best interest to have them remotely controlling the development of this project." Holmes nods in agreement: "This is the game that we here at WB Games Montreal we want to tell. This is our contribution to the Arkhamverse."

And with that we leave the studio, but not before we notice a life-size bust of Batman that watches imposingly over the team from one corner of the office; no doubt a superfluous reminder of the significant legacy at stake. But by all accounts WB Montreal has ensured that justice will be served, the Dark Knight will rise again. In spite of the arrival of next gen, the most intricate and detailed game design this year may be on today's hardware.



"EVERYTHING WE PUT IN THERE IS ABOUT EXPANDING THAT AUTHENTIC REALISATION OF BATMAN"

♠ There's a greater focus on Batman's detective skills. He can replay crime scenes and scrub back and forth for clues.



HACKING CAN BE FUN!

"THE WAY I like to think of it is that it's a little bit like what happened with platformers," says Guay when we ask how they're making hacking fun in *Watch Dogs*. It's all action-based and pretty fast – you find the object you want to hack and you exploit it almost instantly. "At some point people were playing platformers and it was all about timing your jumps, and then some people had a good idea and they made the jump automatic, then it's about finding the right path. It's about making your plan and that's kind of the same thing that we did. Hacking used to be 'Okay, now I'm going to have to play this mini-game 500 times', but we thought instead of that let's make it automatic access, so now it's about how you use it and what you do with it."

Thanks to the city being run via one centralised operating system, Aiden is able to hack into everything it has to offer.

The comparisons to *Assassin's Creed* aren't unfounded; Aiden can move across the cityscape with a certain amount of ease.



■ Who is Aiden Peace? The best narrative-driven open worlds give you an icon who's worth spending hours with. Let's hope he joins the club.

Watch Dogs

CONCEPT ■ *Watch Dogs* has players taking the role of Aiden Pearce in something that feels like a midpoint between *Assassin's Creed*, *GTA* and a modern techno thriller.

Ubisoft breaks down its open-world epic for us

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: TBA
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Ubisoft's Montreal studio is an umbrella label for over 2,300 developers at this point, working on different projects and employing 30% of the industry staff in Quebec. Probably most synonymous with *Assassin's Creed* today, it's been at the centre of every title in the series to date. Even the mediocre ones.

Developer History

Assassin's Creed 2007 [Multi]
Prince Of Persia 2008 [Multi]
Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood 2009 [Multi]
Splinter Cell: Conviction 2010 [Multi]
Far Cry 3 2012 [Multi]

High Point

Assassin's Creed II is a quite brilliant historical epic featuring a genuinely interesting lead character in Ezio Auditore



***Watch Dogs* genuinely has new ideas in terms of its game design, in allowing you to use the city against the enemies of protagonist Aiden Pearce.** From what we have seen of the game so far, though, there is also a lot of familiarity in terms of the way it borrows from the open-world genre, and although we are more than confident that it will arrive as a well-rounded third-person adventure with a certain degree of innovation, we are certainly not expecting it to be a mandate for next-gen open-world games in the way that some people are perhaps expecting.

It's on current-gen hardware, for one. While we saw the next-gen version of *Watch Dogs* in action, there's something about a simultaneous release between two consoles that somehow softens expectations of what to expect from the scope of the design. The advantage offered by Xbox One and PS4 appears to be in the quality of character models, which look almost LA Noire-realistic on next gen with impressive levels of details, but there are other advantages for Ubisoft, too.

"There are quite a few," notes producer Dominic Guay. "Obviously there are the graphics but you don't need me to tell you about those – there's also everything related to the dynamism of the city. For example, we're able to simulate the water in full 3D; if you go on a boat the waves that form will affect other boats. We're also able to spend more time giving brains to the other people on the streets so that they can basically be smarter, *and* there can be more of them. It's what I call dynamism; basically, the way the city reacts to you, we are able to push further on the Xbox One."

We asked Guay to explain to us how Chicago was recreated for the game with regards to its real-life inspiration – the methodology reminds us somewhat of Rockstar's approach to aping New York with Liberty City. "We took Chicago and we shrunk it," Guay says. "We didn't want to make it so massive that you took an hour to drive across it, so we've made a more condensed version. The idea is that if you have a super powerful sports car that drives at 200mph you need a certain scale that can support that. [The world] is pretty large; you can go around the city limits and you can go on the lakes and on the river, too. Ultimately, though, it was more important for us to create density than just scale for the sake of scale."

> "It's what I call dynamism; basically, the way the city reacts to you, we are able to push further on Xbox One"
> DOMINIC GUAY UBISOFT MONTREAL

Guay elaborates. "What I mean by density; if you're on a street corner of a big city, there's lots of things going. We wanted to tackle that and have the feeling of lots of things going on, especially in Chicago, it actually has an under city in the downtown. There are actually two layers of the city on top of each other, plus you have the river so we really wanted to support the density. We took all the landmarks and the things that people would expect in Chicago and we condensed it, basically."

The city doesn't blow us away in the demo. It's early on, and we've only seen a very small snapshot of what it has to offer, but the artistic take on Chicago doesn't immediately inspire awe in the way that Los Santos does in *GTA V*. The lighting effects are superb, but we're yet to see much in terms of environmental variety aside from a few slums. Everything else is rather convincing when it comes to mechanics, though, with shooting and driving looking pretty high end, while the ability to manipulate the Chicago to your will looks absolutely refreshing in terms of interactivity with the environment.

Intrigued about how many of these abilities there are in *Watch Dogs*, we quiz Guay on how these skills will progress. "When you start out, you're already able to hack into certain elements but it's not as far-reaching as what we've been showing off. You'll start with *some* abilities to hack, for example, you could hack into someone's phone or into a computer that you see, but you can't necessarily start right away and hack into the traffic lights. But then, what's going to start happening is you're going to get opportunities to invest and upgrade some of your hacking abilities. You're going to basically have a tree of skills that you can upgrade and decide what you're going to be focusing on."

/// "Ultimately, we don't want you to [immediately] have the ability to hack into everything and explore the city, but at some point you will be able to hack into everything." We ask Guay about some of the more elaborate abilities in the game, which elicits a promising response. "Well, I don't want to spoil everything, but one of our most powerful hacks is on the electric grid. We've shown its very far-reaching effects, but in reality affecting electricity, it's doing a lot of things. It can be useful for distraction, for stealth, it can cause traffic accidents or traffic jams, anybody in the street will be affected by it. It cuts any form of electric equipment in the city, so players will be able to use it in many ways."

In terms of tactical capabilities, *Watch Dogs* offers a lot of new ways to play with your enemies. "You can hack into the transport system, so hacking a train, hacking traffic lights and stuff like that. We've shown how you can hack into bollards, so anything that you'd expect has a remote access to the city and eventually the player's going to be able to hack it."

Mission variety is the lifeblood of any open-world game, and it's something Ubisoft Montreal is conscious of – *Assassin's Creed*

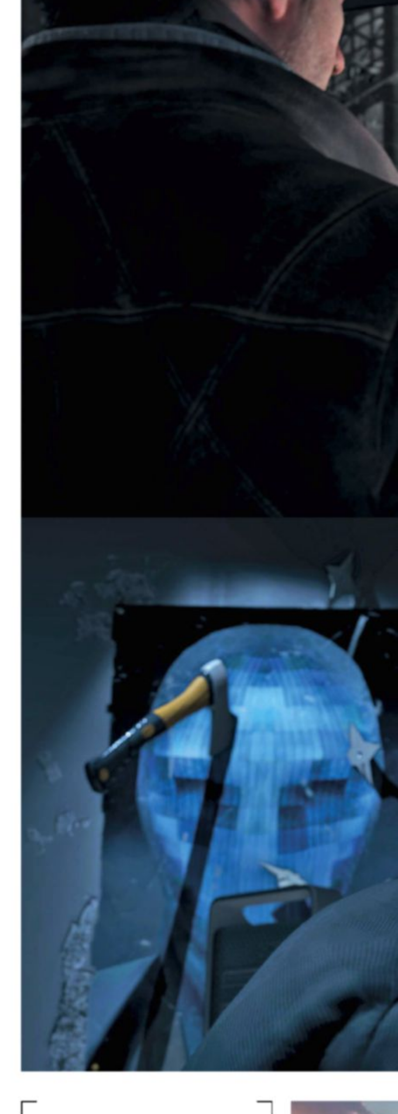
ENJOYING THE CITY

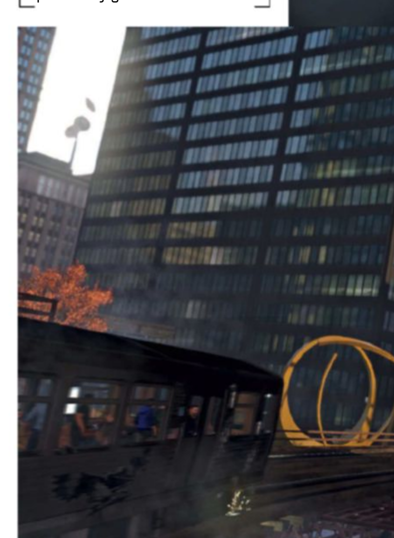
CHICAGO IS built to be fun, even if you are just there to mess around. Open-world elements matter, as well. "They are very important; we do realise that a lot of gamers want to move forward in the story and really focus on that, but the way we built and structured the game, you're going to have a lot of distractions and a lot of things going on," Guay says. "The way we expect most people to play is that initially they'll be very much geared towards the main storyline but then as they see and hear all of those things going on in the city they can get involved in them and try to inflict their own type of justice and really grow into those types of distractions."

> "You can hack into the transport system, so hacking a train, hacking traffic lights and stuff like that"
>
> DOMINIC GUAY UBISOFT MONTREAL



Above: Chicago itself at least appears to be varied, and it's certainly different to the kind of urban environments we've seen in the open world genre in different years. Key will be variation across its different districts – an issue *Assassin's Creed*'s boring locales have never quite solved.





Above: Despite seeing the game in action, we're still basically in the dark when it comes to the moment-to-moment details of the story. For example, who's this? Keanu Reeves with a beard? Right: Altering these chases as you go will hopefully feel like a new experience. Turning genre conventions on their heads is what we've been asking for from *Watch Dogs* since it was announced. Below: The hacking stuff aims to be dynamic rather than rudimentary, heightening the action side of stealing people's cash rather than the arduous admin and software installations that presumably go with it.



only started to function as a series when it got this side of things right with the second game. *Watch Dogs* wants to promote freedom of approach alongside a linear narrative. "There are different styles of missions; there will be certain times when we will force a type of mission, for example a car chase or something. But our best missions, we think, are when we give the player an objective and let them handle it their way. You can infiltrate a compound with all guns blazing and just blow the whole thing up or you can be very sneaky and go in and out and no one's the wiser.

"One of the things we always try and support as much as we can is people who really want to focus on the hacking. That compound, for example, you don't even have to set foot in it; it's possible to hack your way into it. The idea is that some players will naturally want to focus on the direct approach where others will want to be sneaky."

/// Essentially, though, Aiden has the tools to unleash total chaos on Chicago – there, of course, has to be some consequence to his actions. "Aiden's not bad, he's not evil, but he's also not the perfectly good guy, he's somewhere in the middle," Guay tells us. "The player is the one who is going to define where in the middle he is. We have what we call a reputation system and depending on how you act, depending on the type of things you do, if you want to be ruthless or if you want to minimise casualties and collateral damage, it's going to affect your reputation.

"You're never going to be like the avatar of good, though, or the avatar of evil. You'll be somewhere in the middle, but we're going to reflect that back to you. We want to give you a realistic impact on this city based on how you play. People are going to start talking about you and the media is going to start reporting on you. You're going to start seeing how people perceive you and then you're the one that's going to decide how you play. The last thing we want to do though is judge how players want to play. If you want to be ruthless, that's perfectly fine. We don't want to tell people how to play, but that's how people will perceive you."

It sounds a little like *Red Dead*, then, in the changing ways Aiden will be perceived – and that's the feeling we get from *Watch Dogs* in general, at this point: it's an evolution rather than a revolution, bringing some interesting new ideas to a heap of existing concepts. If this is going to be heralded as the *Assassin's Creed* of this generation, something with a slightly different flavour that manages to shift systems on buzz alone, it looks like it will arrive as a complete experience. Right now, we think it's the environment that might make people feel it's not next gen 'enough', as these things are often ludicrously interpreted at the start of any generation – but our anticipation for *Watch Dogs* has still not wavered.

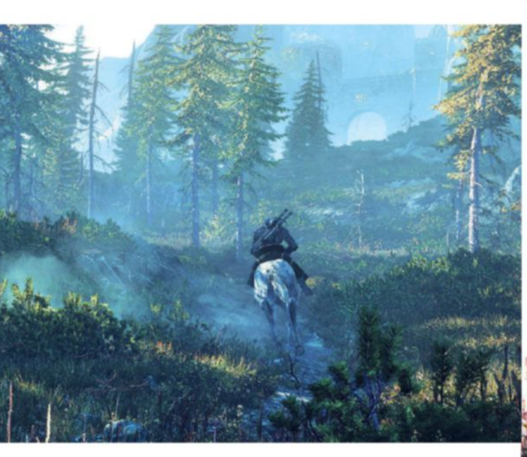
Below: We got to see the entire encounter with this giant creature play out, as CDPR demonstrated Geralt's abilities to move around in combat and get the better of larger enemies – the animation is a considerable step up for the series. And in case you needed more reassurance about the world waiting for you out there, it's 35 times bigger than *The Witcher 2*.





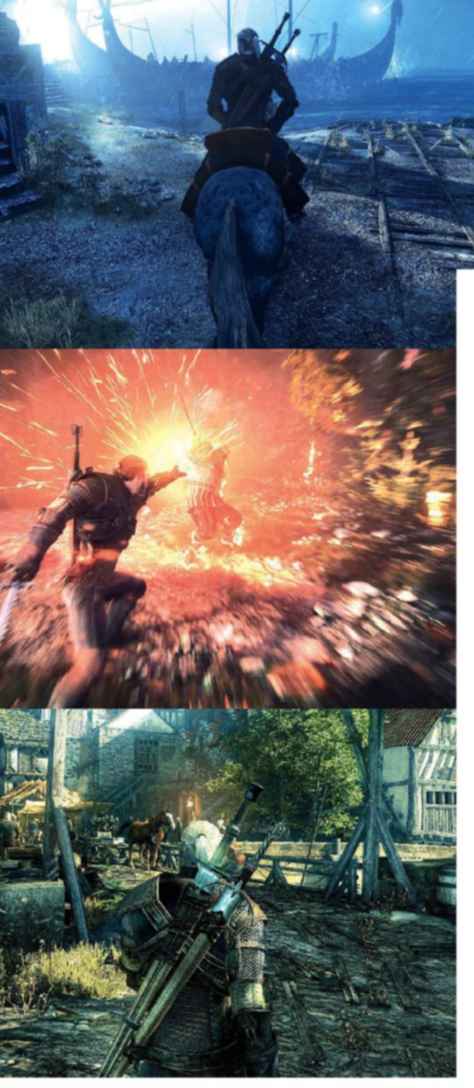
STORY MATTERS

PERHAPS THE one unconvincing element of *The Witcher* to date – and something the series lacks next to its competitors – is the quality of its scriptwriting and voice-acting, something that BioWare and Bethesda regularly excel at. While we were moderately impressed by what we saw of *The Witcher 3*'s narrative, this needs to be just as high on CDPR's agenda as setting and combat design. While the ideas behind the story of *The Witcher 2* were spot-on for creating an intriguing path for players, the moment-to-moment execution was a little clumsy. *The Witcher 3* would benefit from addressing that.





Right: We've yet to see the console versions in action, but considering CDPR is releasing the game simultaneously on all platforms, we see that as something of a good endorsement.



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

CONCEPT ■ The climax of Geralt's story, this 100-hour RPG promises a branching dark fantasy narrative, as well as a *Skyrim*-beating world in terms of size.

Meet the fantasy RPG's next-gen watermark

There's a good reason behind *Oblivion* being the most well-regarded of this generation's early titles. The launch of a new console tends to dovetail with throwaway experiences or familiar sequels that offer only a small taste of what new hardware can pull off. From the start, however, Bethesda sent out a statement of intent about the possibilities of a fantasy RPG on these consoles. CD Projekt RED's efforts with *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* may well accomplish the same for Xbox One and PS4.

The demo was easily among the best we saw at E3. We were shown how moral decisions manifest themselves in the game, which seemed binary in the one example we were shown of how a village deals with a violent ancient spirit, though some will obviously shape the world in more elaborate ways. Like *The Witcher 2*, that ability to shift the state of the setting through your actions is enticing, yet it's the detail with which the world is brought to life that really impresses right now.

The version we've seen in action is running on PC, and depicts a world where you can make out individual blades of grass swaying in the wind, with weather effects that manipulate lighting in a stunning fashion. The seas are richly detailed, with whales diving into the water. As we're shown protagonist Geralt meditating we see the world move in time lapse – nothing seen in an RPG to date rivals this in terms of spectacle. It looks extraordinary, and the snapshots we've seen of the open world so far suggest that there's detail within the environments to back up the size, too, though this is a challenge that few developers have been able to navigate successfully.

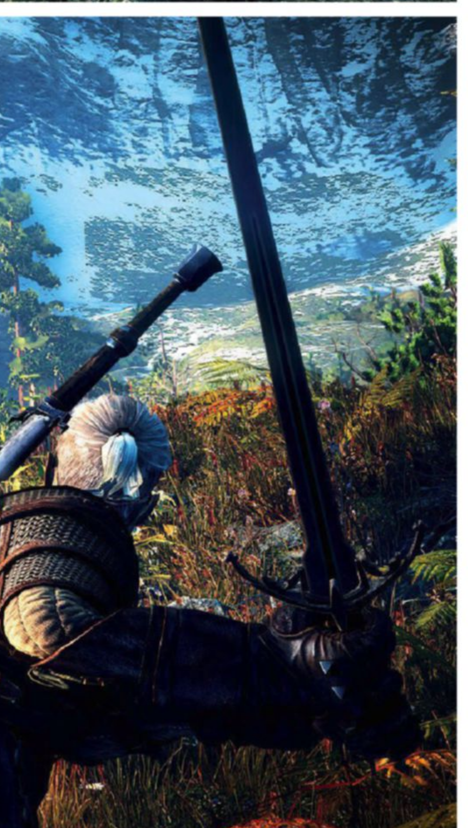
There are three main regions to the world, each inspired by a different element of European folklore. There's No Man's Land, a swamp-ridden, dangerous locale that's been damaged by war; an Amsterdam-inspired environment called Novigrad that has its own fantastical version of organised crime and Skellige, which we see in the demo; an immense archipelago where the one island we see is bigger than the entire playing space of *The Witcher 2*. The washed-out colour scheme feels more in line with popular dark fantasy games like *Game Of Thrones* now – that realistic angle to this magical world is a perfect match for CDPR's next-gen engine, which permits atmospheric touches better than the previous two games did.

/// The animation of the creatures is remarkable, too. When Geralt faces down one of the game's 80+ monsters, we see he's more easily able to manoeuvre in order to dodge attacks, while fire spells emerge from his hand in a hail of gorgeous sparks. Technically, it's so impressive – and it's that elaborate step up in ambition that surprises the most about *The Witcher 3*, and offers an interesting parallel to *Dragon Age: The Inquisition* which is looking to do much the same thing, in taking that concentrated fantasy RPG to a bigger scale.

If you are not open world in this genre now, then you simply don't have a place within it, apparently – inevitably Bethesda's own *Elder Scrolls* will challenge the technical marvels of *The Witcher 3*'s open world. By getting here first, however, and setting such a strong example, *Wild Hunt* may well find itself synonymous with this generation's dynamic storytelling potential, much in the same way *Oblivion* was.

There's no doubting the background of the developer behind *The Witcher 3* – the quality of the final game will depend on CDPR's ability to craft an open world that can sustain hours of exploration. It's not a small undertaking at all, but is a challenge that's clearly being tackled with a passion to be the best in the genre.

> "A lot of effort was made to usher in the potential of the next generation with a new kind of RPG experience"
>
> ADAM BADOWSKI CD PROJEKT RED, PRESS RELEASE



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Poland
Publisher: TBA
Developer: CD Projekt RED
Release: 2014
Genre: RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

CD Projekt is, of course, part retailer and part developer, having changed the landscape of PC gaming in Poland by translating and releasing a number of significant games. RED is an offshoot of that, having adapted *The Witcher* and turned it into one of the top RPGs on the market.

Developer History

The Witcher 2: Assassin Of Kings **2011 [Multi]**

The Witcher **2007 [PC]**

High Point

The Witcher 2: Assassin Of Kings More ambitious than most of this generation's RPGs, *The Witcher 2* combined a massive branching storyline with well-executed real-time combat.

Need For Speed: Rivals

CONCEPT ■ Blending single and multiplayer together in a similar way to last year's *Most Wanted, Need For Speed* looks to continue excelling with its first next-gen edition.

Cops and robbers gets serious

It was surprising that out of the racing titles in contention on next-gen consoles, including respective PS4 and Xbox One exclusives *DriveClub* and *Forza 5*, *Need For Speed Rivals*, in our opinion, made the most impressive use of the new console tech. That's not a slight to those titles – the level of drama in *Rivals* and the outrageously lavish presentation offers such a great snapshot of this new generation's capacity to amaze beyond shinier or more realistic cars. *Rivals* feels like an amalgamation of elements from various *Need For Speed* titles, collecting crowning elements like the cops vs robbers-centric multiplayer modes and giving them a Criterion-level of polish that'll hopefully mean the series avoids brand-diminishing entries like *The Run*.

"It's pure collaboration at this point," says Ghost's development director Tatyana Dyshlova when we ask about Criterion's involvement in the game. "We have a large part of Criterion working with us on the game as well – a lot of designers and developers. I think we all just want to keep it alive and keep innovating and thinking outside the box. Keeping with the spirit of awesome-looking cars and awesome-looking environments, like this really great cinematic experience, and seeing what else we can bring to it."

The main thing we noted during our hands-on session with the cops and robbers mode was how well balanced the open world structure was with the deathmatch-style elements, since we barely suffered a mere 30 seconds of downtime before zapping another racer with the police car's EMP blast. We fear losing a lot more time to this mode when it arrives on Xbox One and PS4.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: EA
Developer: Ghost Games / Criterion
Release: 19 November
Genre: Racing
Players: 1-16

Developer Profile

Built specifically to create *Need For Speed* games as an offshoot of DICE, Ghost Games has recruited staff from the likes of Turn 10, Bizarre and Rockstar to assemble a studio that makes the most of a Frostbite 3-powered racing title. Criterion is collaborating with Ghost Games in a move that should sustain the form of the series.

High Point

Need For Speed Rivals
This is the studio's first game, so the high point to date is injecting some life into the non-Criterion *Need For Speed* games, which have traditionally been lacking since the Guildford-based studio dropped *Hot Pursuit* in 2010.



NEXT-GEN BENEFITS

■ THOUGH IT'S coming to existing consoles, too, working with the PS4 and Xbox One has been of real benefit to Ghost. "It's exciting at two hundred miles an hour because, you know, you're breaking into trees and they're flying in your face, but it's also exciting if you just park up and see how it all flows," says Dyshlova. "A lot of that is going to look amazing on next gen because we can do so much more with the hardware."

STORM RISE

■ THE LUDICROUSLY melodramatic weather effects recall the sense of time-lapse incredulousness we've seen in the GRAW games. The dynamic weather system throws in a *Blade Runner*-esque, cinematic downpour rather than a more realistic light drizzle, yet these kind of cosmetic touches play an important role in showing off the PS4 (the console we tried the demo on).

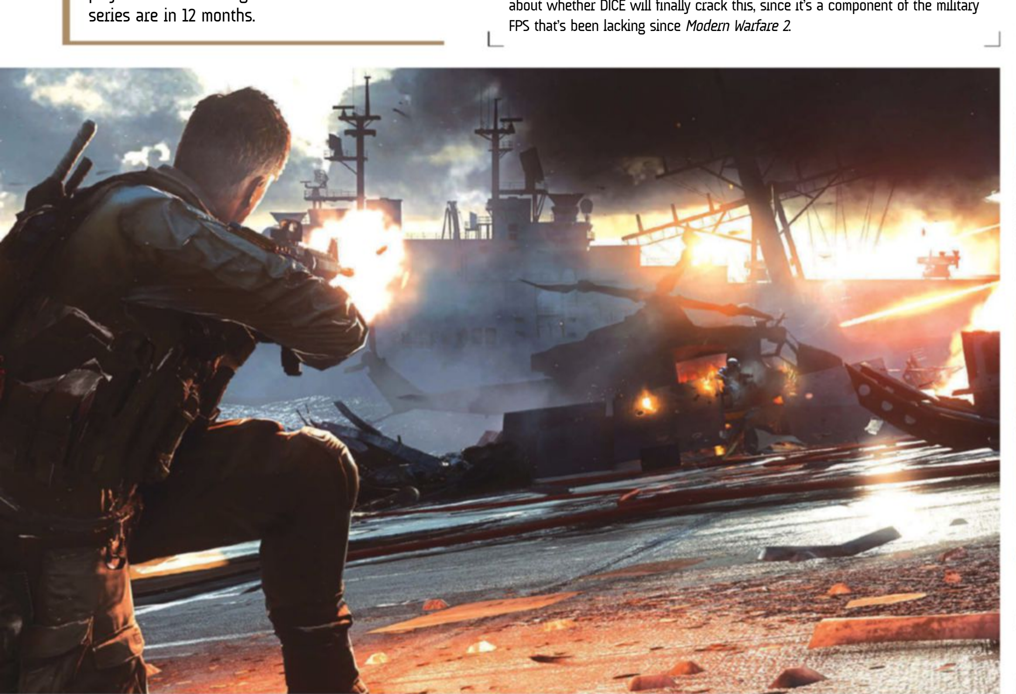
POLICE COPS

■ OUR HANDS-ON was all within the fancy-looking cop cars, and pursuing criminals gives you a pleasing predatory feeling. Landing a successful EMP hit is relatively easy, the burden mainly being on the opponent in front of you being savvy enough to evade coming attacks rather than just speeding away in a straight line – performing a takedown is therefore tremendously rewarding.

BATTLEFIELD VS. CALL OF DUTY

BATTLEFIELD HAS the potential to take an even bigger slice of the FPS market this year by releasing on four consoles. DICE's series has an advantage, in that the full potential of its design formula hasn't been reached yet – the scope of the conflict can exponentially increase on Xbox One and PS4, whereas *Call Of Duty* has basically perfected its own small-scale run-and-gun adrenaline rush style of play. It'll be interesting to see where both series are in 12 months.

Above: Of course, there's a campaign in the package as well. We're curious about whether DICE will finally crack this, since it's a component of the military FPS that's been lacking since *Modern Warfare 2*.





Above: Watch out, you never know when some doofus is going to break formation and bring the whole strategy crashing to the ground (every ten seconds, in our experience with *BF4*).

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox 360
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: EA
Developer: DICE
Release: October
Genre: FPS
Players: 1-64

Developer Profile

Founded by students, DICE's first hit *Battlefield 1942* took off just as giant arena-based multiplayer exploded in popularity. From there, the studio has mainly iterated on this one military series, peaking with its last, third instalment. The exception to that is the experimental and unique *Mirror's Edge*, of course.

Developer History

Battlefield 3 **2011**
Mirror's Edge **2008**
Battlefield 2 **2005**
Battlefield 1942 **2002**

High Point

Mirror's Edge. DICE's technical expertise has contributed a lot to the evolution of that formula, but when the studio applied its craft to this first-person platformer, it employed a unique kind of art direction that characterised its utopia setting.

Battlefield 4

CONCEPT ■ The returning *Battlefield* series provides massive-sized FPS action with no doubt hundreds more hours of content to uncover.

Hands-on with the Shanghai map on PC as we become the victims of our own team's shortcomings

Crash goes the gunboat, as a fellow player races it into a wall with games™ in tow, driving stick like something out of Duran Duran's *Rio* video. That's the thing about *Battlefield* – you're susceptible to failure if you happen to play the game with complete strangers who have their own agendas. When we got hands-on with *Battlefield 4*'s Shanghai map on PC, playing alongside and against 63 other media people, it was interesting to see how incoherent the experience is when players don't have a team strategy, and how inconsistently we fare when we're not playing among friends.

What was obvious about *Battlefield 4* during our hands-on was the spectacle – the arrival of this franchise on next-gen consoles is unlikely to disappoint, and for fans who have seen DICE hone their craft with *Bad Company* and *Battlefield 3*, the enormous potential of *Battlefield 4* to be a genre-defining event on Xbox One and PS4 is surely exciting for early adopters.

The Shanghai map, which you've undoubtedly seen by now with the enormous, dynamic collapsing skyscraper, is absolutely huge, structured neatly by a river that separates the two halves of the map. Naturally, this becomes the centre of much of the long-range vehicle combat as both sides take shot from across it. Unless you're inside a tank, crossing the bridges is almost impossible, yet it forms a dramatic setting for some of the larger-scale battles. One particularly thrilling encounter for us was spoiled by yet more incompetent teammates – manning a tank turret, the driver took us off a curb and flipped the armour over. Like we've said, having the right team remains an essential part of that Battlefield experience hanging together.

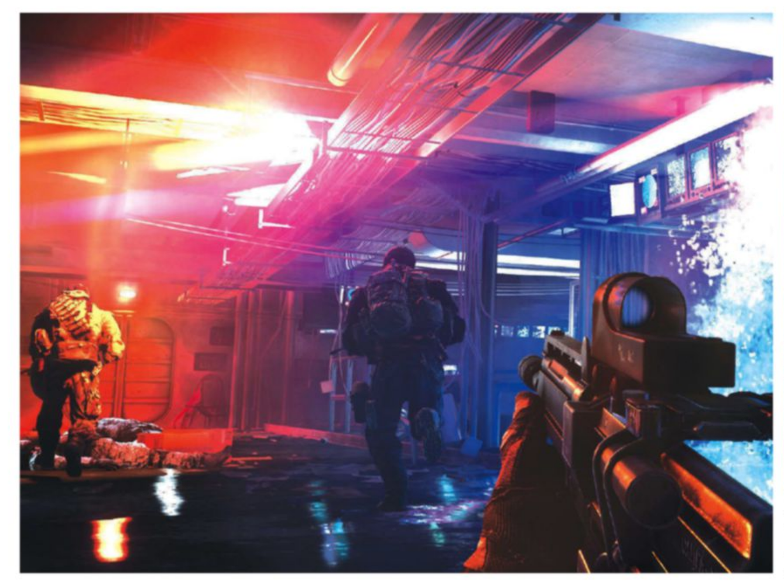
/// Yet we had more success in the urban streets, where, using an ally's vehicle to absorb some fire, we took down a decent number of players with supporting machine gun fire. The streets offer so many angles for landing the perfect shot, and due to the way the centre of battle constantly shifts around the Shanghai map, it appears that we'll spend a long time learning exactly how to get the advantage in any given scenario here. Shanghai appears as well-crafted as any of the best maps the series has seen to date – and the dynamic elements are partly responsible for that appeal.

We stood on the collapsing skyscraper for about five minutes, hoping someone would take out the multiple points of weakness that trigger its demise. Sadly, it wasn't to be, but the tremors that occur below you certainly add atmosphere to the gunfights going on up top. Looking down, meanwhile, we see that pretty much every quadrant of the map has its own brand of chaos going on. This is the lifeblood of the *Battlefield* experience, and it's been realised in the most cinematic way you could hope for.

Street battles are rife with the unexpected, as helicopter chassis pelt past and tanks emerge from around corners to scatter your men. The key to *Battlefield 4*'s enduring success will be the quality of dynamic set pieces and the ambition of the map design – Shanghai is hopefully just one of many to come like this. When battles are massively populated and vehicles are blowing each other apart in the streets, the game comes to life in a way that we haven't really seen before in this genre.

To accommodate the vast amount of simultaneous players, the textures of course have to take a hit when it comes to things like detail on the side of buildings, but not in any way that could be considered detrimental to the game as a whole. The spectacle is here – let's hope the console ports live up to the impressive PC version.

> "We want you to create an experience and story yourself"
> LARS GUSTAVSSON DICE





■ Above: We imagine *Battlefield 4* will be one of the most widely-purchased next-gen titles when the consoles launch. It should be a remarkable technical showcase.

Thief

CONCEPT ■ Rebooting the cult Ken Levine-created series, *Thief* contemporises the complex elements of the franchise and retains its bleak tone.

Eidos Montreal continues its metamorphosis into the new Ion Storm

■ Above: This is the kind of combat encounter you can weather when just one guard faces you, but as soon as more join the fray, things become a little bit precarious for Garrett.

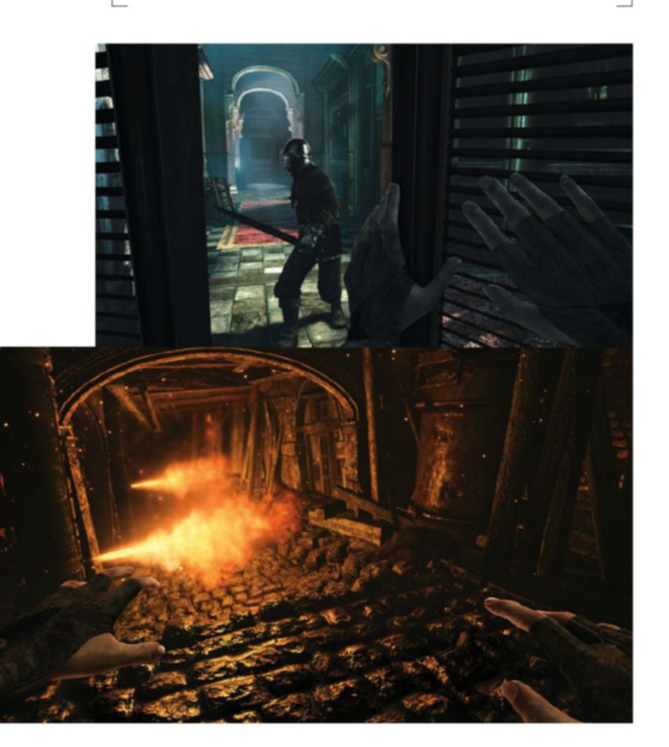
Despite our vast videogame experience, it's probably best to start by admitting that we died a lot during our hour-or-so session with *Thief*. How many times? It's hard to say, but we definitely hit double figures. Enough to make us feel self-conscious as Square Enix staff pottered around behind us. They weren't wasted deaths, however, even if they were mildly embarrassing – we just had to readjust ourselves to the cruel rules of *Thief*. Once we accepted each death as a learning experience, we became more aware of our surroundings, and began attacking each environment as a puzzle box, waiting to be unlocked. That part of the series' DNA has not been sacrificed – indeed, it's still fundamental to the identity of *Thief*, and the caution required to move through the game's environments brings nice weight to some rather modern shooter mechanics.

Thief does indeed permit multiple approaches to every given scenario, and its systems may even be more complex than *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s. There's a heightened sense of reward to this revival of the PC franchise, and the grim realisation of this dark Victorian world quickly separates it from the oft-compared *Dishonored*.

/// We're dropped into a garden outside a mansion, where we experiment with the water arrows to put out lights, using the Focus mode to slow down time and land killing blows, as well as the careful process of thieving items from enemies. The use of light and dark also takes a lot of time to get used to – initially, being in the light for even a couple of seconds will usually end with you dead at the hand of guards, and indeed, it's only as we used Garrett's ability to scale walls that we started to actually progress through the grounds and into the mansion.

> "From a high level perspective, the game is infiltration, stealing, escaping"
> STEPHANE ROY, EIDOS MONTREAL

We spent quite a while exploring these gardens, and there are a few bits you might miss entirely if you ardently stick to one route and don't tit about like we elected to. After being found out by guards, the best you can usually do is scuttle into the darkness and camp out at another point until they lose interest, depleted of health and barely hanging in there. We foolishly tried to take on three enemies at once after a botched stealth takedown, and after using the Focus mode to



■ Above: You soon become conscious of missteps through the environment, since almost every area is riddled with insta-kill traps. Yet you become used to it very quickly, and it hardly seems unforgiving.





GRIME AND PUNISHMENT

THIEF IS making a move away from the supernatural elements of the past, it seems, focusing instead on the filthy details of Britain's streets on the brink of what appears to be a civil war. The game's primary antagonist, the Baron, triggers an uprising through the brutal nature of his rule – it's an engaging backdrop that makes you feel like the surrounding world is on the edge of change, and that Garrett is at the centre of this emerging chaos.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PS3, 360, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Eidos Montreal
Release: TBA 2014
Genre: First-Person Shooter
Players: 1

Developer Profile

A studio seemingly built to handle Square Enix's PC legacy franchises, Eidos Montreal made *Deus Ex* franchise update *Human Revolution* and *Tomb Raider*'s utterly forgettable multiplayer.

Developer History

Deus Ex: Human Revolution **[2011]**
Tomb Raider **[2013]**
Deus Ex: The Fall **[2013]**
Thief **[2014]**

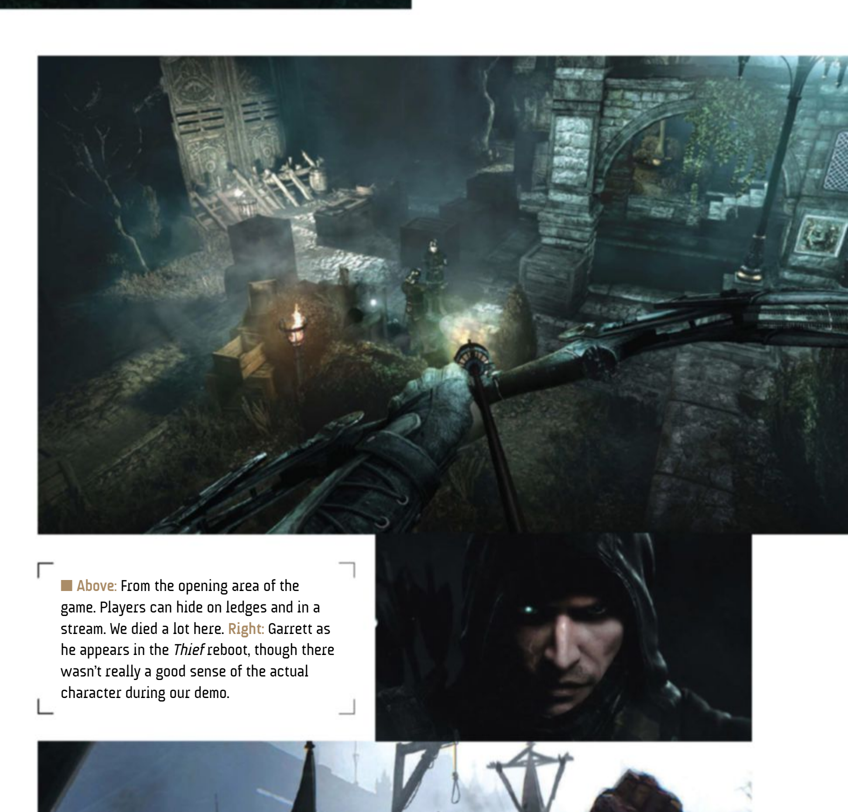
High Point

Deus Ex: Human Revolution. Capturing the multiple approaches and rich story of the acclaimed PC franchise.

land a few targeted blows, we simply didn't have the means to fight our way out of it.

Inside the mansion, however, the structure of *Thief* shifted into more of a puzzle-led gauntlet of traps, which can either be avoided or shut down. The mansion is pretty big, and at some point we stray into a room that Garrett advices us to turn back from due to its lack of relevance to the main quest; still, we can't help but admire the labyrinthine nature of such a level, and these dead ends nevertheless added texture to the world around us. We were caught out numerous times by tripwires and accidentally activating floor switches. In these instances, you learn to use Focus quite a lot to scope out the solution to your continued deaths, or alternatively, just to work out what was killing you in the first place.

/// The last part of this level involves lining up four matching symbols on two sides of a crypt to reach the loot of this particular level, before firing a rope arrow up to the glass ceiling to make your escape. That's when a more typical action-like bit of *Thief* kicks in – Garrett must flee a burning bridge while it collapses into the water, in a section that mixes careful manoeuvring through a fiery corridor with rooftop jumping and even a few puzzles to figure out your next move. Based on what we've seen, we're hopeful that the full game can capture the demo's level of variety – *Thief* kept changing up structure throughout our hands-on with the game, and each shade of that experience managed to work in some way. Right now, we're optimistic that Eidos Montreal can bring the same level of credibility to *Thief* on PS4 and Xbox One (and now, 360 and PS3 too, apparently) that it did with *Deus Ex.*



■ **Above:** From the opening area of the game. Players can hide on ledges and in a stream. We died a lot here. **Right:** Garrett as he appears in the *Thief* reboot, though there wasn't really a good sense of the actual character during our demo.

Mario Kart 8

CONCEPT ■ The first HD *Mario Kart* will arrive at a time when the Wii U is in dire need of high-end titles. The racing series is always a strong seller for any Nintendo platform.

The Wii U readies one of its blue shells

The gliding feature in the last instalment is perhaps the slightest of contributions to *Mario Kart*'s design evolution, in that, while offering variety in terms of eliciting a different feeling for the player, this feature didn't really expand the potential of the track design. That's where *Mario Kart 8* promises more than floaty pace-breakers. With the ability to scale walls via anti-gravity pads, Nintendo seems to have found a way to properly build on *Mario Kart*'s many-times-perfected formula through a creatively viable element. Though some might immediately write it off as a gimmick, this allows Nintendo to instil some real ambition in the *Mario Kart* franchise that could make the series feel fresh again, rather than the reliable system seller that it's become.

Of the three tracks we've sampled, one loosely based on San Francisco – that's cable cars ridden by toads and steep urban streets, rather than crazy drunks and sunbathing seals – offers the best snapshot of how anti-gravity works in *Mario Kart 8*. As you come up to a steep turn, there's a *Tony Hawk*-style curb ramp that leads you up onto the side of the buildings. From here, your perspective shifts in a way that could be described as *Inception*-esque, or more tangibly as the kind of feeling you get when falling over after spinning on the spot.

The track then continues on the side of buildings, with collectables, ramps etc acting more as a multiple route than a secret side road. That's about as big as it gets for an evolution of the *Mario Kart* formula, and by the third track, a Luigi's Mansion-themed affair with walls that close in and out in a dizzying ripple, Nintendo starts to play with the idea by having you snake up and down through corridors as you find yourself thinking about each track laterally, which isn't something you've ever really had to do with *Mario Kart*.

/// Without the anti-gravity elements of the track, you'd have a regular *Mario Kart* course with all the usual side roads and rubber-banding nonsense to contend with.

The potential within that idea, as the complexity of the track design escalates in traditional *Mario Kart* fashion, is quite extraordinary in the context of this series. Much in the same way *Super Mario Galaxy* manipulated your perspective of the surrounding world and used it to provoke a response, so too does *Mario Kart 8*. Combined with the frequent gliding sections, it provides more in the way of set pieces, which doesn't harm an experience that's otherwise familiar in pretty much every way.

Being the first HD *Mario Kart* adds a surprising amount to the track design, too, since environments have a lot more going on in terms of background NPCs, while lighting and water effects maximise the Wii U's capabilities. It also runs so smoothly you'll question why so many developers have been criticising the power of the console. There are no hints of shortcomings here.

Of course, not everything can be a winner, and just as *Mario Kart Wii* stumbled when using that console's USPs to enhance the experience, so too does *Mario Kart 8*.

> "The newest instalment of the gold standard racing game…has karts racing up walls"
>
> NINTENDO PRESS RELEASE

While the Wii U controller is a comfortable fit for power turns with the triggers, the instantaneous switch to tilt controls transforms the game into something that feels unconvincingly arcade-y. There's also a horn that takes up much of the touchscreen interface, which is a silly, cosmetic touch that's likely included for belligerent goading in multiplayer.

Yet the Wii U's ongoing struggles to find relevant uses of the controller beyond inventory management and options isn't really a problem in the case of *Mario Kart 8* – this is simply something that Nintendo needs to get right as a reliable triple-A title. The addition of an element that could permanently expand the canvas of the series' capabilities should provoke some optimism, then.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: 2014
Genre: Racing
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Working at Nintendo through every one of its console generations, Hideki Konno has overseen the company's EAD 1 department, which has made a significant contribution to its continued success. Konno was also one of the brains behind the 3DS.

Developer History

Super Mario Kart **1992 [SNES]**
Yoshi's Story **1997 [N64]**
Nintendogs **2005 [DS]**
Mario Kart 7 **2011 [3DS]**

High Point

Mario Kart DS. Probably *Mario Kart*'s finest hour to date, with the best selection of tracks in the series and a superb multiplayer component that contemporised the racing series.









■ Right: Familiar tracks returning in HD is an enticing prospect, and we're intrigued to see how integration with the anti-grav elements will work.



■ **Above:** It feels like *Mario Kart* has been searching for a viable gimmick since *Double Dash*, for better or worse – anti-gravity at least leaves a lot of room for creativity in environmental design. **Left:** This is where we got our first taste of anti-gravity in the game: a level evidently based on America's second greatest city (probably), San Francisco. An odd choice for a *Mario Kart* track that brings welcome verticality.



SOLVING THE SOFTWARE PROBLEM

NINTENDO'S GESTURE OF bringing out *Mario Kart 8* and *Super Mario 3D World* at Christmas very much mimics the company's attempts to jumpstart the 3DS's fortunes after a bad few months on the market in 2011. That worked, so it'll be interesting if that success is replicated here, especially given how that turning point led to the 3DS' current good fortunes. Strangely, a Nintendo with a lot to prove is the best kind of Nintendo – for the consumer's sake, we hope to see that happen again.



Super Mario 3D World

CONCEPT ■ The follow-up to 3DS title *Super Mario 3D Land*, this is the first *3D Mario* title to incorporate multiplayer – whether you wanted it to or not.

The latest 3D Mario is an evolution, rather than a revolution – but why should that matter?

Following two solid *New Super Mario Bros* titles that perhaps oversaturated the audience for 2D retro reprieves, *Super Mario 3D World* returns us to the 3D canvas of Mario that usually sees Nintendo at its creative best. Indeed, *Super Mario 3D World* plays almost exactly like a more expansive version of *3D Land*, with larger levels to accommodate four players and obvious visual detail upgrades from the handheld title. The concern from some corners is obvious: while *Galaxy* offered Nintendo unlimited potential for visually diverse, brain-twisting level design, *3D World* is working from an arguably more grounded template. Yet such criticisms fail to address just how inventive the 3DS title was, and what a trippy, oddly designed experience it became over time. The level design was some of the series' more esoteric – something to be celebrated, certainly, and no doubt the kind of direction that governs Mario's 3D Wii U debut.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: Out now
Genre: Platform
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Yoshiaki Koizumi
The mind behind many of *Ocarina Of Time*'s revolutionary features, Koizumi has spent much of his career at Nintendo alternating between working on *Zelda* and *Mario* titles, beginning with creating the manual artwork for *A Link To The Past*.

Developer History

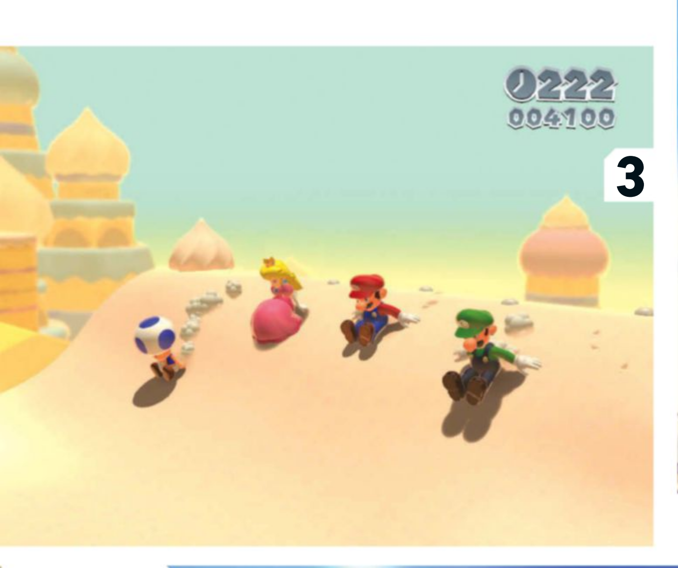
Super Mario 3D Land **2011 [3DS]**
Super Mario Galaxy 2 **2010 [Wii]**
Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat **2004 [GC]**
The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time **1998 [N64]**

High Point

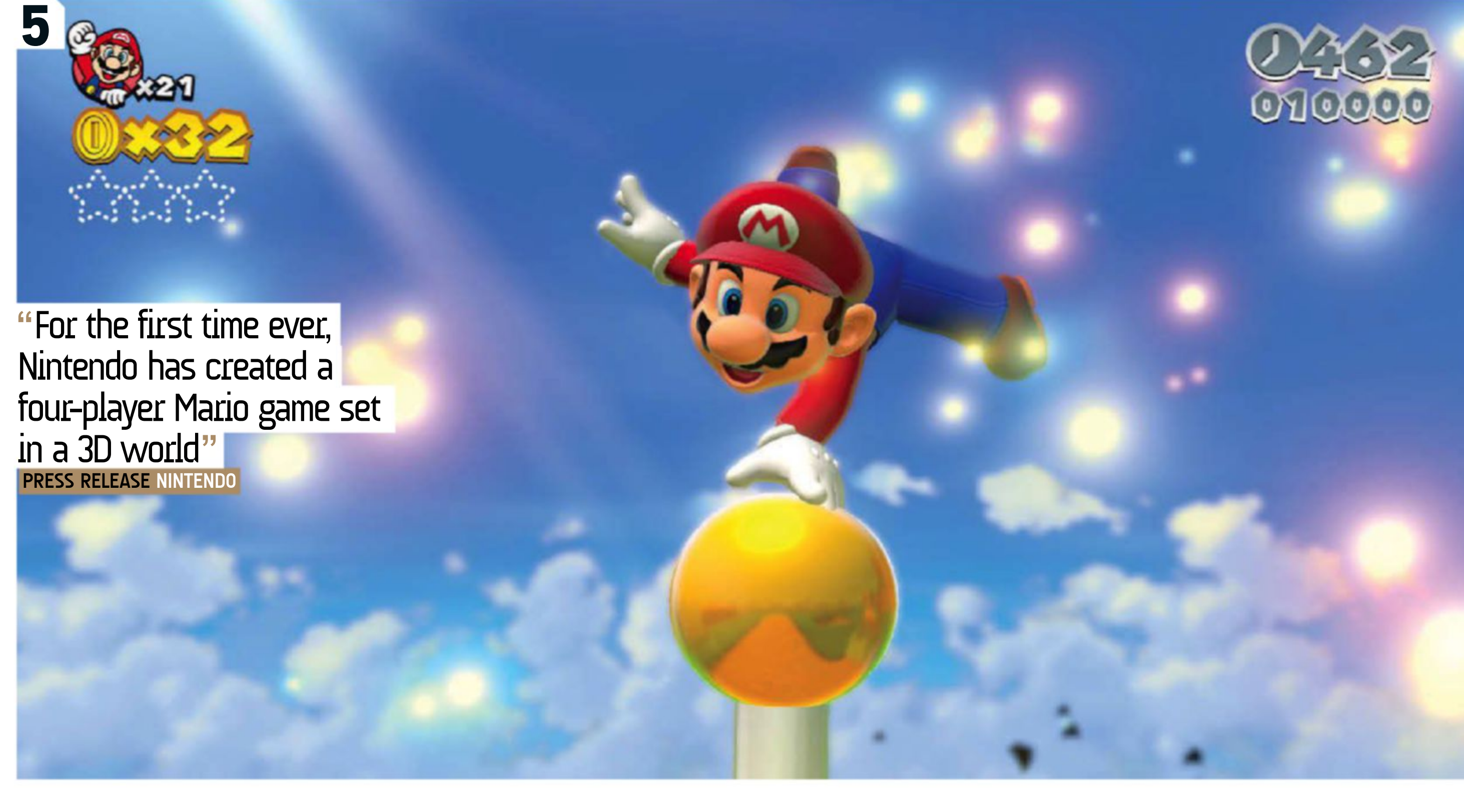
It's hard to pick one highlight of Koizumi's projects given how many milestone projects he's been involved with, but *Super Mario Galaxy* marks an obvious highlight of that character's creative trajectory.

1 PLAYING TOGETHER

MULTIPLAYER HANGS together well thanks to *New Super Mario Bros*-style course correction and wider camera angles that show everything going on in the immediate vicinity – a lot more so than *3D Land*. Like *NSMB*, it turns into a bit of a frantic melee in close-quarters dungeon sections, yet there's a pleasing party-game like daftness to it, with level design in the three levels we sampled (including a boss battle) clearly having the potential to house multiple players comfortably while also working as single-player levels. Players can use their old Wiimotes to join in, which sounds like the modern day equivalent of handing someone a third-party N64 controller in 1998 that has an ominously rubbish 'Turbo' button on it.


3


4


5

"For the first time ever, Nintendo has created a four-player Mario game set in a 3D world"
PRESS RELEASE NINTENDO

2 CAT CALLING

IT MUST be hard to non-gamers to take the medium seriously when you explain that the biggest new features in the latest *Mario* title are pipes and the ability to play as a man dressed as a cat. Yet what this adds is the possibility of being your team's belligerent saviour when they're surrounded by enemies during multiplayer, as Mario bounds around the environment with extra combat power and speed. It's a fun addition and nothing more, really – yet anything that could add a little more texture to multiplayer beyond the traditional power-ups is welcome, really, and the burst of double-pronged advantage it brings in both speed and power adds some energy to multiplayer sessions.

3 WHEN LOOKS MATTER

NORMALLY WE wouldn't dwell on the visual side of things – you can see for yourself how beautiful Mario's 3D debut on Wii U is in these screens – but we feel it's worth underlining how much Nintendo's art direction benefits from being on an HD console. Including *Wind Waker HD* and *Mario Kart* (*Donkey Kong* to a much lesser degree, since it's not as immediately noticeable that there's any real difference), these finally feel like the games that justify the point of the Wii U from a technical perspective, the lack of such games having been one of several reasons the console has faced an early struggle. This could be the promise of the console fulfilled, on that side of things.

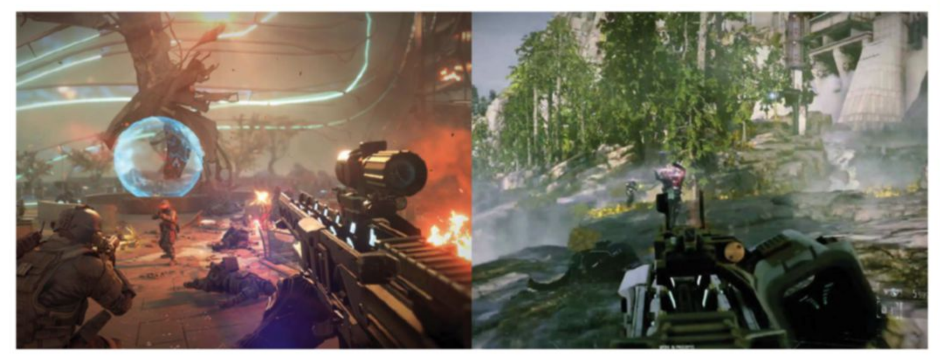
4 PIPE DREAMS

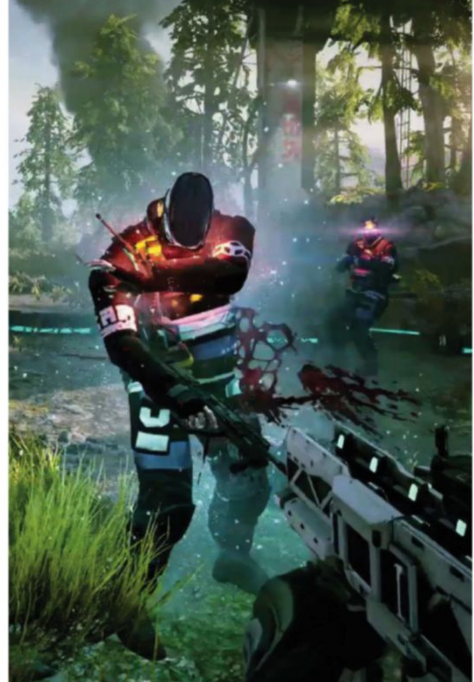
APPARENTLY ADDED to bring more puzzle-based ideas to *Mario*, pipes operate a bit like mini-*Pac-Man* levels where you have to avoid enemies snaking through them at the same time. They're a bit slight in the level focused on them that we played, to be honest, feeling like automated on-rails sections with little input needed, but they could be quite good fun when you're piling four players through them and the plan to reach the safety of the other side goes a bit sour. Hopefully these parts will have a little more going for them in later levels, becoming a bit more maze-like and ludicrously complicated, much as *3D Land*'s extra levels used the existing ideas in a psychologically distressing way.

5 THE GALAXY CONCERN

FROM THE early levels, *Super Mario 3D World* stylistically looks like a middle ground between the *NSMB* titles and *Galaxy*. A step back, then? A cautious gambit to win the biggest audience possible on a currently ailing console? That's one side of it; *3D Mario* will sell systems to the hardcore six to eight million who always follow *Sunshine*, *Galaxy* et al across generations. But the feat of pulling off a four-player *Mario* game isn't to be sniffed at. It provides Nintendo with more than a few logical challenges to overcome when structuring level design, obstacles that will no doubt yield the *Galaxy* team's usual smarts in creating a long-term, rewarding *3D Mario* instalment.

■ Below: *Killzone: Shadow Fall* may have abandoned the claustrophobic gauntlets that defined the previous games in the franchise, but it has retained the weighty movement and brutal gunplay. .





Killzone: Shadow Fall

CONCEPT ■ Guerrilla Games brings *Killzone* to the next generation with *Shadow Fall*. Set 30 years after *Killzone 3*, the game is set to document the rising tensions of the Helghast and they go to war once again with the Vektans over their home planet.

Will Guerrilla make you care about its long-running FPS series once more?

It's refreshing to see Guerrilla Games widening its ambitions as the studio prepares to make the leap into the next generation. As Sony's flagship shooter, there's always a comparison ready to be made, albeit usually a meaningless one, between *Killzone* and Microsoft's *Halo* series. And yet, as Guerrilla attempts to appease an audience that's grown dissatisfied with the flood of corridor shooters, the association between the two seems more apt than ever.

Guerrilla is shaking off habits born of a decade of iterating upon a popular niche of the FPS market, with *Killzone: Shadow Fall* lifting the series sense of weighty movement and gunplay into larger-scale levels, inviting player choice into the fray for the first time. At its core, *Shadow Fall* is still distinctively *Killzone*, but with the corridor gauntlets replaced with open savannahs, it is easy to become enamoured with Guerrilla's efforts to expand the scope of its flagging franchise.

Along with retaining its trademark sense of weighty – almost sluggish – movement, shooting enemies in *Killzone: Shadow Fall* never fails to feel gratifying. The studio has near-perfected weapon feedback and hit detection; the gunplay itself is savage and, thanks to some stellar sound effects, *Shadow Fall*'s core combat loop is better than ever. That's not to say Guerrilla has replicated the '30 seconds of fun' mantra that Bungie's baby adopted over the years; *Killzone* is still a slower, more methodical shooter.

A greater emphasis has been placed on stealth, heightening the tension and drama that has always eluded *Killzone*, with its insistence on making players saunter through claustrophobic paths now all but eradicated. A variety of tools have been placed at our disposal this time too, with Shadow Fall encouraging players to make use of the bigger spaces and tackle objectives as they see fit. Battles are aided by the OWL combat drone, think Navi with no mouth and a laser gun. It has four modes, which can be switched between using the DualShock 4's touchpad or an archaic radial menu.

> "Being a Shadow Marshal is all about dominating the flow of combat… Your OWL combat drone gives you freedom in choosing how each fight plays out"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, SONY

/// Swiping up will activate a context sensitive zipline that works well for both quickly traversing the expansive areas or for simply executing Helghast assailants from above with brutal melee takedowns. The rest of the functions focus on combat and improving your tactical vitality; swiping right will order the drone to scout ahead and engage any unfriendly targets it finds, while swiping left will unleash a shock attack – giving you the perfect opportunity to introduce your knife to fresh blood.

The system works well enough, though the execution is lacking somewhat. Reaching for the touchpad means taking your finger away from the analogue sticks, and *Shadow Fall* isn't exactly the most forgiving FPS. When the pressure is piling on, every movement and shot is precious, and those seconds lost fumbling for your energy shield can be the difference between life and death. Talking of petty annoyances, your health is also represented by the glow of the LED PS Move light on top of the controller, changing from blue to yellow to red as you approach death. It's a gimmick that we will likely see many of the launch titles utilise and then quickly drop, such as PS3's Sixaxis support, as in a lightened room it's difficult to tell what state your life is in – and angling the pad upwards in a firefight is never a viable option. Guerrilla has turned to the DualShock 4 to carry its interesting new systems, though we aren't certain the pad is suited to FPS games. While the triggers aren't as slippery or shallow as the PS3 equivalent, they still feel a bit light to deliver any satisfying feedback – especially when compared to the Xbox One's strong rumble-enhanced showing.

Killzone: Shadow Fall is shaping up to be an interesting chapter in the series' life. This doesn't feel like a franchise making its last stand, instead Guerrilla is making a conscious effort to take what has come before and transition it into a new world designed to showcase both the power of the PlayStation 4 and *Killzone*'s position as a potential system seller.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony Entertainment
Developer: Guerrilla Games
Release: 2013
Genre: FPS
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Microsoft had Bungie, Sony has Guerrilla. The Dutch studio has been responsible for delivering a weighty take on FPSs for close to a decade now, and aside from *Shellshock: Nam '67*, hasn't put its name or talent to other franchises to *Killzone*.

Developer History

Killzone 3 **2011 [PS3]**
Killzone 2 **2009 [PS3]**
Killzone **2004 [PS2]**
Shellshock: Nam '67 **2004 [PS2]**

High Point

Killzone 2 was an extremely accomplished FPS that successfully married a cover system to the gunplay; the story was rubbish, though.

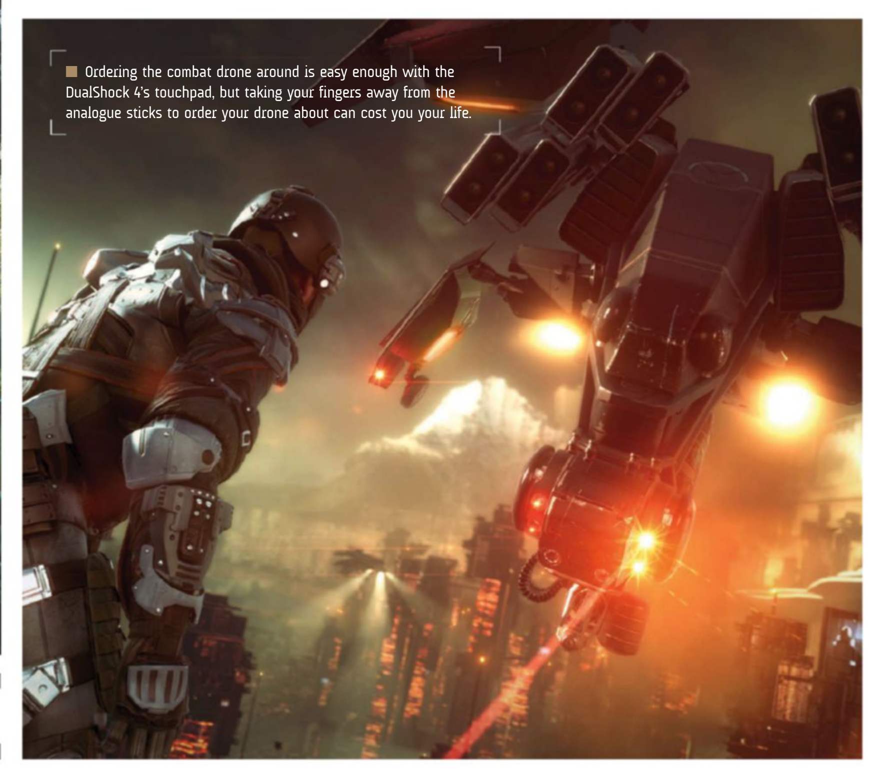
■ The DualShock 4 may be a marked improvement over the PS3's pad, but we still aren't sure whether Sony has done enough to appease FPS fans. It has handled well on everything else we've used it with, but time will tell if it's to the job of delivering a sturdy shooting experience.

OUT INTO THE OPEN

Killzone: Shadow Fall's open-ended levels aren't just for show, but instead they are an extension of the core-*Killzone* gameplay that offer some creative potential. Smoke clouds now mark your objectives, and it's up to you in which order you tackle them in. Ziplines can be used to effortlessly move across the battlefield, allowing you to scale a building to hack a computer and then quickly get your boots back on the ground to set explosives on a downed ISA ship. It creates a more immediate feedback loop than we have ever come to expect from a *Killzone* title and it's refreshing, not enough to wipe away some of the series fatigue, but it's enough to get us excited about the power of the PS4.

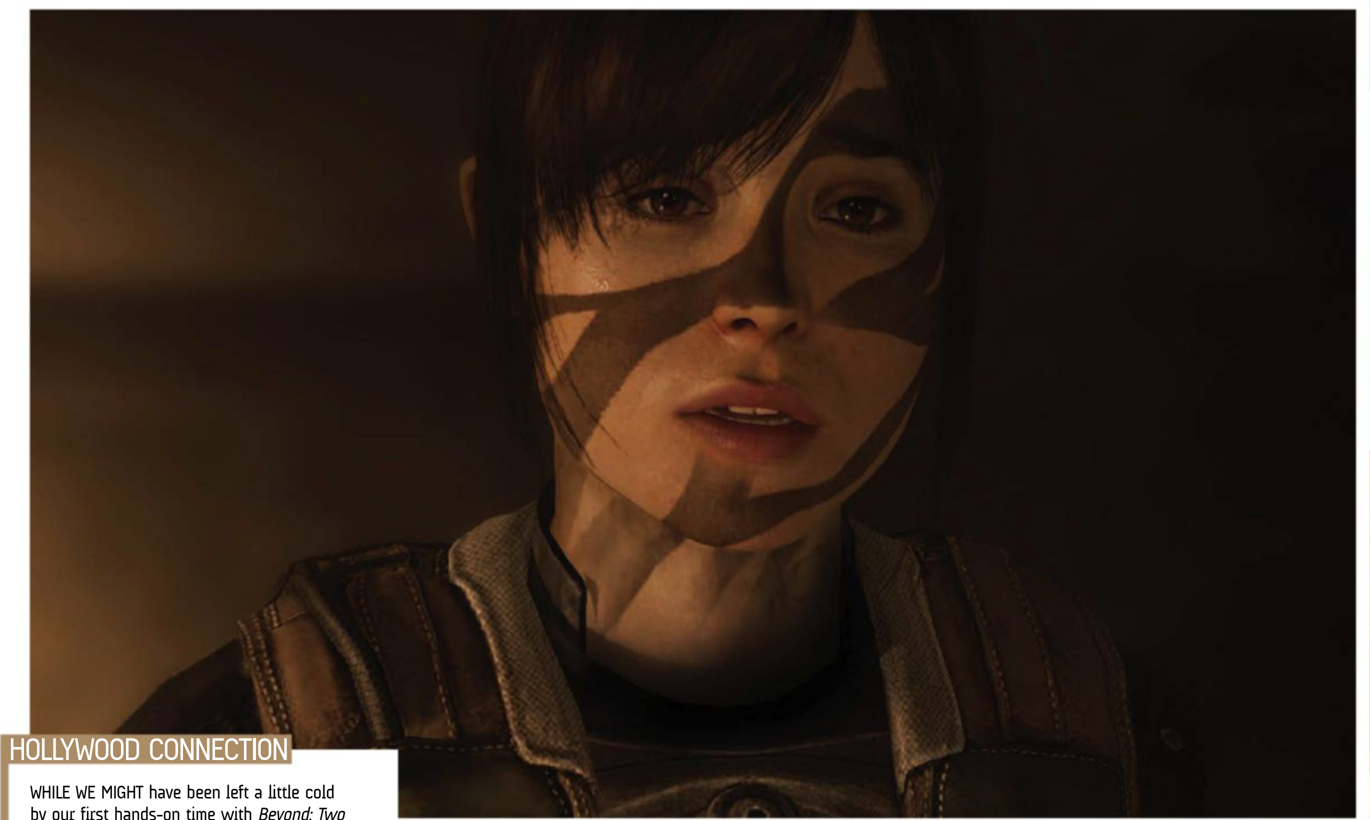


■ Above: Guerrilla still isn't talking about multiplayer, but with the addition of Sony's Share functions and new found emphasis on its online service, it is likely *Shadow Fall* will have a very impressive suite of multiplayer functions.



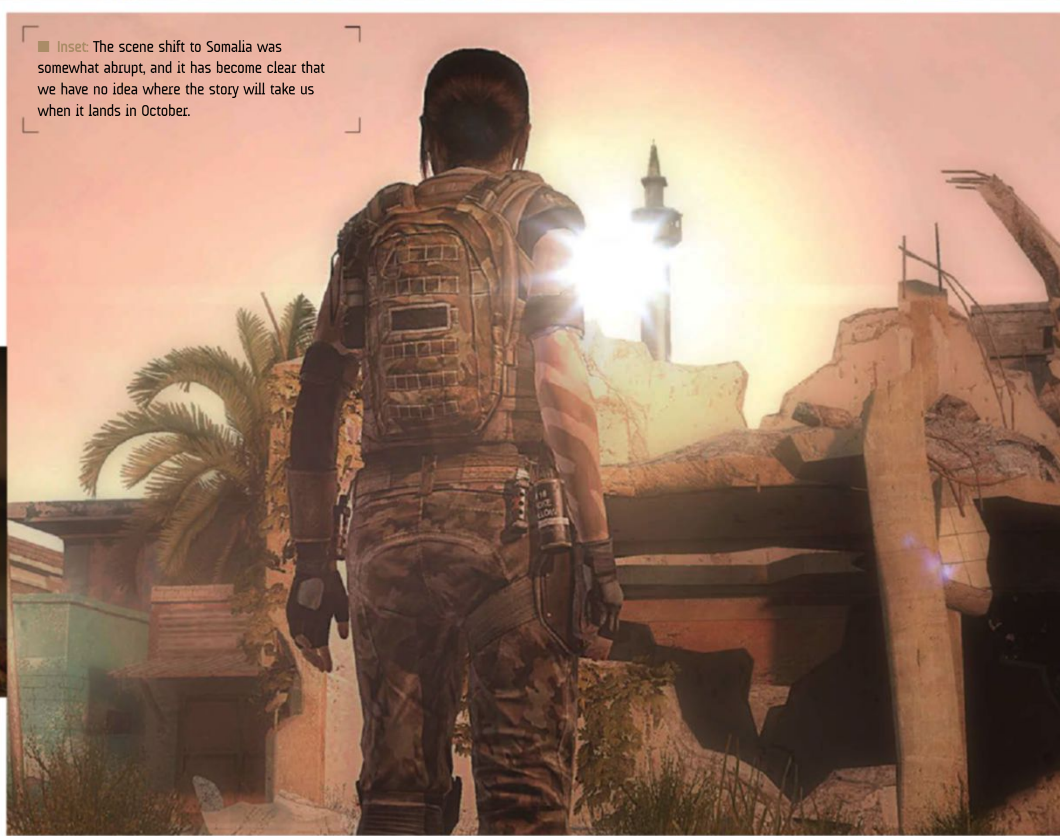
■ Ordering the combat drone around is easy enough with the DualShock 4's touchpad, but taking your fingers away from the analogue sticks to order your drone about can cost you your life.

Below: With Sony positioning *Beyond: Two Souls* so close to the launch of the PS4, it's a statement of intent for the current-gen system's longevity. Right: This recent look at *Beyond* has skewered expectation. The emphasis on action in our hands-on is in stark contrast to the slow-paced drama we had been led to believe the game centred around.

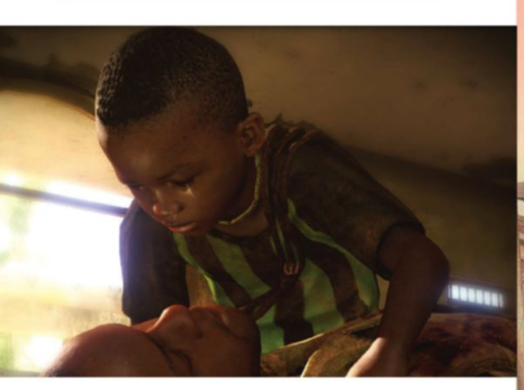


HOLLYWOOD CONNECTION

WHILE WE MIGHT have been left a little cold by our first hands-on time with *Beyond: Two Souls*, we can't complain about the stellar voice acting and motion capture on display. Quantic Dream has signed up some fantastic talent to work on *Beyond*, including Ellen Page as the leading lady and Willem Dafoe as her surrogate father. We only received a small taste of what to expect from the full release, but it is clear David Cage's eagerness to bridge cinematography and videogames is coming ever closer to reality. If *Beyond* is able to match its visual fidelity with engaging gameplay, it will likely be a game we are talking about long after the transition to next-gen has been made.



Inset: The scene shift to Somalia was somewhat abrupt, and it has become clear that we have no idea where the story will take us when it lands in October.



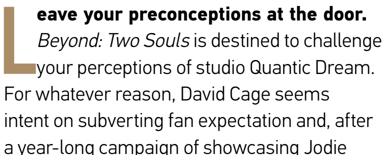
Above: What David Cage has planned, we aren't quite sure, but Jodie's exploits in Somalia see her take a child soldier under her wing. He provides covering fire while you use your ghostly powers.



Beyond: Two Souls

CONCEPT ■ David Cage and Quantic Dream return with *Beyond: Two Souls*, the studio's first title since *Heavy Rain*. A supernatural thriller in nature, has David Cage bitten off more than he can chew?

Beyond Quantic Dream's ability?



Leave your preconceptions at the door. *Beyond: Two Souls* is destined to challenge your perceptions of studio Quantic Dream. For whatever reason, David Cage seems intent on subverting fan expectation and, after a year-long campaign of showcasing Jodie Holmes hitchhiking with her supernatural sidekick, the studio has decided to shift the conversation to modern warfare.

The shift in tone is abrupt; from scared girl on the run to a CIA trained war-machine, this hands-on opportunity with *Beyond* inspires little confidence in the actual content of the story and its execution – yet it's almost impossible to judge it out of context. It isn't simply narrative concerns that we are burdened with as, for all of Cage's pomposity on elevating the medium to a new cinematic plateau, the most pressing concerns we have surround *Beyond*'s core mechanics.

Heavy Rain's restricted systems could be justified in the context of an ongoing murder mystery. The updated point-and-click adventure template worked well as you took on the role of a detective desperately trading time for clues. Alas, in the war-torn streets of Somalia the trick is executed about as well as you might expect. The battlefield is littered with glowing button prompts that control everything from your movement to tactical options. *Beyond* takes the concept of a cinematic experience perhaps a step too far.

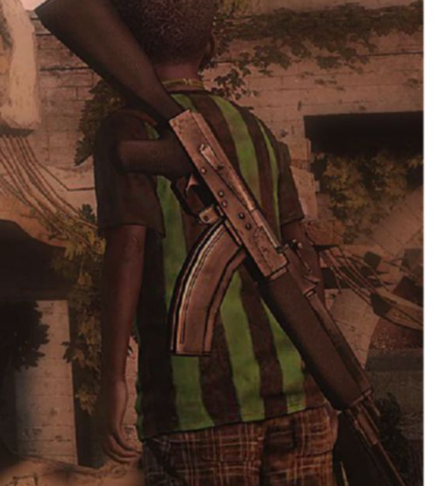
> "Playing through 15 years of Jodie's life promises to deliver one of the most powerfully emotional experiences on PS3"
> **PRESS RELEASE, SONY**

/// With our lengthy demo as a guide, it's becoming clear that Cage isn't trying to define the potential of cinematography in game direction – instead he wants to bridge the gap between film and videogame – *Beyond* feels like an interactive storyboard because of it. Press X to move here; press Square to peak from behind a wall. One footstep out of line and Jodie will simply refuse to move, or worse, activate a cutscene pushing you back until you discover what button it wants you to press.

When you can go no further, Jodie's ghostly companion, Aiden, comes into play. Press Triangle and you'll switch between the duo, a spectral being that can float around areas of the battlefield and choke or possess enemies after an interactive QTE. The game will only let you do one or the other – so the opportunity to forge emergent gameplay is absent.

After we were granted limited control around the admittedly beautiful battlefield, we were introduced to a taste of close combat – and this could be *Beyond*'s saving grace. For all of Jodie's power harnessing the supernatural, she's still just a teenage girl in over her head, and so incoming blows will need to be avoided at all costs through flicks of the analogue sticks. It has more in common with the *Dragon's Lair* style of scripting than that of *Heavy Rain*; there are no QTE or directional prompts, instead the angle of the incoming attack or movement needs to be successfully anticipated to successfully dodge. It's an engaging facet of design in an otherwise underwhelming demo, with the analogue sticks informing Jodie's momentum as she throws punches and bricks back at her assailant. When you mess up, the blows and stabs hit hard, the violence is shocking and besides, *none* of us want to see Ellen Page hurt – she already had to suffer Michael Cera's extended company and Jason Bateman's dancing in *Juno*.

There's still time for Quantic Dream to refine *Beyond* into a cohesive videogame and, admittedly, this is one of those rare games that doesn't have the capacity to demo well. We imagine that David Cage is in fact forging a grand narrative here, and this demo has hardly scratched the surface. The combat and impressive visuals created hope, but we are certainly aware that playing *Beyond* shoulder to shoulder with other players were not the conditions in which Cage intended us to experience his latest project. The trick will be making sure Aiden doesn't feel like a hangover from a Nineties B-movie, a lame apparition that drags the drama down.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3
Origin: France
Publisher: Sony Entertainment
Developer: Quantic Dream
Release: 8 October
Genre: Action-adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Quantic Dream has been at the forefront of progressive storytelling for over a decade now. Led by David Cage, the studio has been eager to pursue greater drama in videogames. While *Fahrenheit* was a loved title, it wasn't until 2005's *Heavy Rain* where the studio's potential was realised.

Developer History

Heavy Rain **2010 [PS3]**
Fahrenheit **2005 [Multi]**
Omikron: The Nomad Soul **1999 [PC]**

High Point

Heavy Rain was a breakthrough for interactive cinema, elevating it from a novel concept to a deep, well-conceived gameplay paradigm. The noir-ish story was also consistently intriguing.



Square Enix creative director Yosuke Shiokawa previously stated that *Murdered: Soul Suspect* was inspired by *Die Hard*, as Shiokawa wondered whether if John McClane had died during the film would he have continued to fight the terrorists as a ghost.

Below: When O'Connor investigates a crime scene, a world cloud appears across the environment, until he pieces it together to form a theory.

Murdered: Soul Suspect

CONCEPT ■ An innovative spin on the adventure genre, wherein a detective discovers the truth behind his own murder.

Matt Brunner, cinematic director at Airtight Games, discusses the studio's detective-cum-supernatural adventure game

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Airtight Games
Release: 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Airtight Games was founded in 2004 with the express purpose of developing innovative intellectual properties. The first of which was Dark Void, which didn't quite live up to the studio's mandate. However, Quantum Conundrum, a perplexing puzzle-based first-person shooter from Portal co-creator Kim Swift, soon followed before the studio moved onto iOS releases.

Developer History

DerpBike **2013 [iOS]**
Pixld **2012 [iOS]**
Quantum Conundrum **2012 [Multi]**
Dark Void **2010 [Multi]**

High Point

Quantum Conundrum was *Portal* co-creator Kim Swift's spiritual successor and was crammed with just as much brain-tickling complexity and wry humour.

Originality runs deep through Airtight Games' veins. While *Dark Void* failed to take off, last year's *Quantum Conundrum – Portal* co-creator Kim Swift's cerebral follow-up to Valve's classic – proved that the studio had plenty of creative muscle. Talking to **games™**, Airtight Games' cinematic director Matt Brunner discusses how *Murdered: Soul Suspect* continues the studio's tradition of producing innovative IPs.

When did the collaboration between Square Enix and Airtight Games begin?

Square Enix approached us years ago with an idea for a ghost game, and there were a number of elements – mainly based on film – that they were coming to us with thinking that there was a seed of something there that could be really interesting. We watched a lot of ghost-based imagery, discussing who the character could be, what the game could be about and what kind of gameplay we could make that would be unique and interesting.

As it turns out, there really wasn't a good template out there for even referencing for this type of a game. So we started inventing what it would mean to develop a game based around a ghost character. We wanted it to be an action title and we started thinking about what it would be like to start out as an action hero, then die immediately and how would that carry through. It then became apparent that the detective character was a really interesting choice.

Are the mechanics based around point-and-click gameplay?

Actually, what we've shown so far is a little more like that just because it's easy to show

> "Nobody really knows if the next-gen consoles are going to take off, but the audience is still there on the current gen"
> MATT BRUNNER, AIRTIGHT GAMES

off the experience. We have been very aware of not making it a 'Press X to move forward' type of game. The investigation elements require some thinking and attention to clues, especially if you're after a high score, in a sense. And then, if you're a player that just wants to blaze through and play the story, you could do that, but I would say there's a nice balance between narrative and gameplay.

Clearly Detective Ronan O'Connor is a complex character – was casting the role difficult?

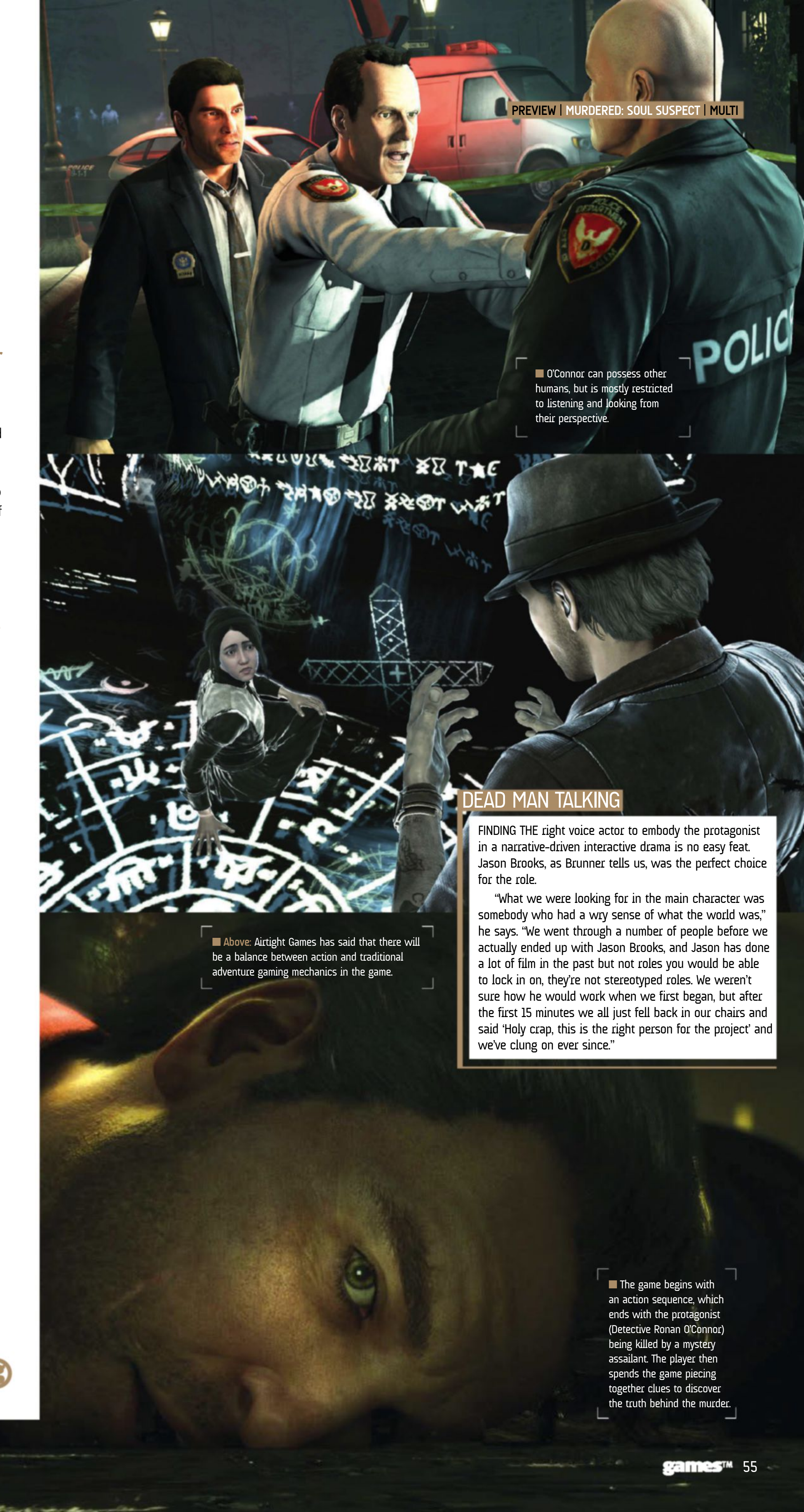
We spent a lot of time working on his fictional bio at the studio with our lead writer. He would write these extensive character descriptions of what we were after and we would really start honing in on what we wanted his voice to sound like, how he would express his sense of humour, how he handles stress and what is it that's motivating him, what are his fears?

The ability for Ronan to walk through walls must have posed an interesting technical challenge for the studio?

It's a horrible design headache. How do you design a clear path for your character when you can bypass it in anyway possible? That was the real challenge we were faced with. There was a small group of us early on into development that said 'It doesn't feel like I'm a ghost yet, why? What's missing?' It just feels like you need to be able to pass through objects. At that time all walls were solid. So we tried it, we got four rooms and let players walk through them and instantly they all got disorientated and really lost, even with four rooms. So one of the things we do in the background of the game is give the player subtle environmental hints, almost obsessively so, about where they are so that the player doesn't get lost. We've also spent a lot of time putting voice over and other elements that will redirect them if they do get lost, but interestingly enough when you run around now in the game and you start getting used to it you start thinking 'I don't really want to play a game where I can't just pass through any wall I want'.

There's been much scepticism in the industry about releasing a game so close to the end of a console cycle. Do you fear the effect it'll have on sales?

If it succeeds I hope that vindicates us. I don't know if this gen or next gen makes much of a difference at this point. Nobody really knows if the next-gen consoles are going to take off, but the audience is still there on the current-gen. It doesn't really worry me that much; the right thing to worry about right now is just making the game.



O'Connor can possess other humans, but is mostly restricted to listening and looking from their perspective.

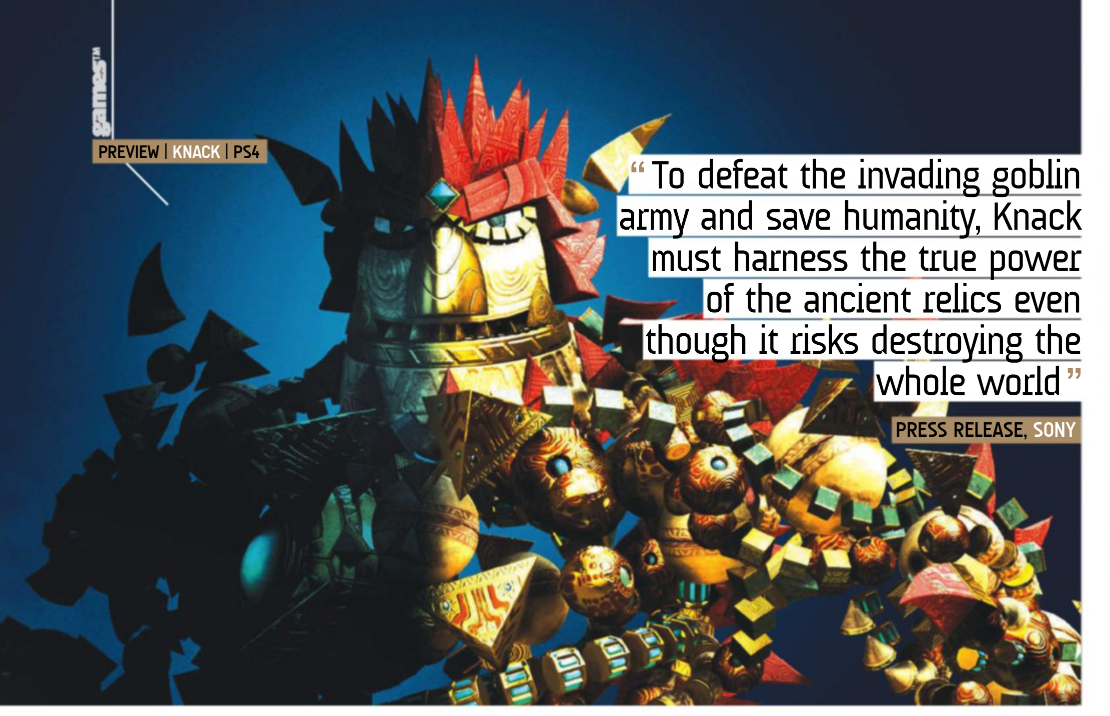
Above: Airtight Games has said that there will be a balance between action and traditional adventure gaming mechanics in the game.

DEAD MAN TALKING

FINDING THE right voice actor to embody the protagonist in a narrative-driven interactive drama is no easy feat. Jason Brooks, as Brunner tells us, was the perfect choice for the role.

"What we were looking for in the main character was somebody who had a wry sense of what the world was," he says. "We went through a number of people before we actually ended up with Jason Brooks, and Jason has done a lot of film in the past but not roles you would be able to lock in on, they're not stereotyped roles. We weren't sure how he would work when we first began, but after the first 15 minutes we all just fell back in our chairs and said 'Holy crap, this is the right person for the project' and we've clung on ever since."

The game begins with an action sequence, which ends with the protagonist (Detective Ronan O'Connor) being killed by a mystery assailant. The player then spends the game piecing together clues to discover the truth behind the murder.



> "To defeat the invading goblin army and save humanity, Knack must harness the true power of the ancient relics even though it risks destroying the whole world"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, SONY



■ Knack may look puny to begin with, but once he's done his fair share of smashing, the debris can be collected and used to increase his size and ferocity.

Knack

CONCEPT ■ Mark Cerny may have become the public face of PlayStation as the lead architect of the new next-gen system, but he's also working with Japan Studio on *Knack* as a director.

Revealed under false pretences?

***Knack* is proving more difficult to pin down than we would ever have suspected.** This family friendly action-adventure game led the videogame industry into the next-generation, it opened the PlayStation 4 reveal back in February and was a sign that Sony was ready to let platformers lead its brand again, a call back to the days of Crash Bandicoot's immediate exposure. Or so we thought; while Knack, with his cutesy graphics and undeniable charm, may look like a character that enjoys the simple pleasures to be found in locating increasingly dangerous environments to transverse, the reality is he's far more interested in smashing than jumping.

There were plenty of ideas presented in the four-part demo we played through, though as it became clear that *Knack* borrows far more from *God Of War* than it does *Spyro The Dragon*, we were left wanting. Utilising a Kratos-esque dash, Knack is able to dodge incoming attacks with a flick of the right thumb-stick and can fight back with a basic set of combos, though if there's any greater complexity to be found in the combat system, we certainly didn't see any evidence of it here.

The level design is surprisingly linear. A fixed overhead camera guides you along a defined path with little room to manoeuvre from the beaten track. Initial eyes-on previews had *Knack* inviting comparisons with *Katamari Damacy*, but in reality the core gameplay loop has far more in common with Travellers Tales' *Lego* series. Objects around the world can be smashed - littering the floor with tiny bits of debris – all of which can be collected and immediately added to Knack's body.

It's an impressive showcase of the PlayStation 4's power, and as the objects dynamically build your avatar it is certainly gratifying to grow from humanoid to King Kong-sized in a matter of minutes. Enemies scale with you, and it isn't long before you go from dodging arrows and clubs from humanoid size assailants to battling tanks and mechanised foes. Special attacks can be utilised too, further showcasing the particle effect eye-tease that Sony's Japan Studio has created. One such move sees Knack slam into the ground with a dazzling particle effect shower that damages all enemies in range, while another sees all of Knack's individual pieces swirl around him in an impressive visual display.

At this stage in development it's a little worrying to see the pace leaning towards the sluggish side of play, with its 30fps refresh rate only highlighted by Knack's lumbering movement and stutter special attacks. *Knack*'s affiliation with conventional brawlers was surprising considering its charming Pixar-style graphics, but that doesn't make it any less fun to play.

If all *Knack* does is stand out from the slew of racers, shooters and sports games that will no doubt flood the PlayStation 4's launch line-up, then we applaud Sony for trying to appeal to gamers across the market – but from what we've seen so far, it certainly has a way to go if it wants to match the success of some of the other titles Mark Cerny's name has graced over the years.

■ If anything, *Knack* highlights just how talented the team at Japan Studio is with the cutesy adventure game getting some of the best graphics we've seen out of the system so far.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony Entertainment
Developer: SCE Japan Studio
Release: 2013
Genre: Action-adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

As the primary Japanese development and production arm of Sony, Japan Studio is responsible for some of the PlayStation's most innovative and acclaimed titles. Encompassing other studios such as Team Ico and Project Siren, Japan Studio is always read to push the expectations of videogame development.

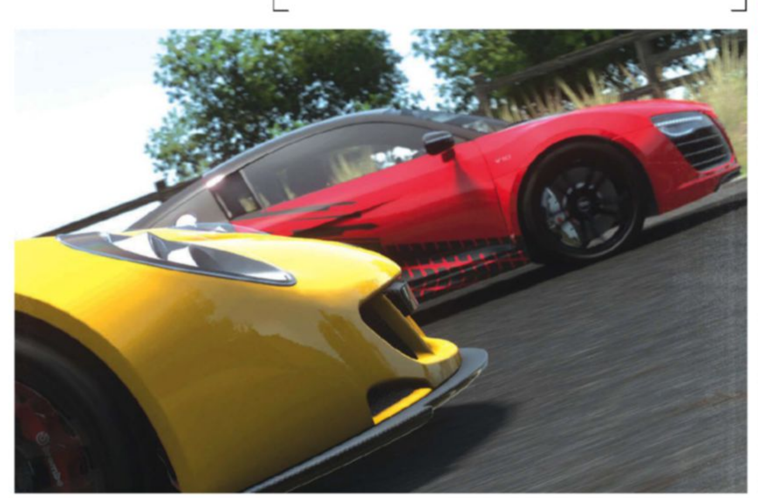
Developer History

Demons' Souls **2009 [PS3]**
The Eye Of Judgement **2007 [PS3]**
Shadow Of The Colossus **2005 [PS2]**
ICO **2001 [PS2]**
Ape Escape **1999 [PSone]**

High Point

When the PSP was in desperate need of a game to define its niche in the industry, *LocoRoco* arrived with innovative control, an undeniable charm and a refreshingly elegant approach to platforming.

■ Below: Standing up against Ubisoft's *The Crew* and Turn 10's *Forza 5*, *DriveClub* may be fighting a losing battle in the visual department. It makes up for this with an impressive stability, running at a cool 60fps.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Evolution
Release: 2013
Genre: Racing
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Established in 1999, Evolution Studios is a British studio best known for the *MotorStorm* series that came to define racing titles in the next generation. Though before this, Evolution solidified their reputation as a quality developer through the *WRC* franchise on PS2

Developer History

MotorStorm: RC **2012 [PS Vita]**
MotorStorm: Pacific Rift **2008 [PS3]**
MotorStorm **2006 [PS3]**
WRC World Championship **2001 [PS2]**

High Point

MotorStorm: Pacific Rift took the technically refined off-road racing to a more interesting, tropical locale.

DriveClub

CONCEPT ■ Evolution leaves behind *Motorstorm* as it attempts to blur the line between arcade and simulation racer in this exciting launch-day release.

Taking pole position this November?

Is it scary that the PlayStation 4 is only a few months away, and still a clear launch day must-have has yet to emerge? There is precious little space in the crowded racer market this winter; with *The Crew*, *Need for Speed: Rivals* and *Forza 5* all vying for the attention of an audience that is likely to invest in existing brands more than new IP, especially as the sting of a new system hits ailing wallets across the globe. The licence to stand out from the crowd is becoming increasingly difficult when almost every competitor to Evolution's *DriveClub* is boasting similarly connected feature sets and impressive visual fidelity.

Sony is giving Evolution every opportunity to succeed, even going as far as to have *Gran Turismo 6* release on current-gen so there's market room for both. *DriveClub*'s problems stem from presentation; in video and screenshots it looks like an average simulation-racer – one lacking the graphical edge of its competitors. Jumping into the driver's seat, however, reveals something else entirely. *DriveClub* is straddling the line between sim and arcade racer delicately, exhibiting more in common with *Project Gotham* than *GT*, as cars can be swung around corners and tear across tracks without very much consideration for driving lines.

Where *DriveClub* threatens to eliminate its fierce competition is through its progressive online systems, built around user-generated challenges. It's the type of videogame that an active community will thrive on, as novice players can stand shoulder to shoulder with the podium players earning fame for their club in a way that feels rewarding. Skilled players will earn points by shaving seconds off lap times – novice players will do the same by beating drift and cornering challenges set by other players of similar ability. *DriveClub* scours the world, and your friends list, for challenges and ghost-time trials based on your skill and experience. As the game ingests your lap times, the challenges will evolve dynamically, and by your second or third lap it's easy to become engrossed in a race as you seek, not pole position, but the opportunity to stamp your face across the entire track.

> "DriveClub threatens to eliminate its fierce competition through its progressive online systems, built around user-generated challenges"

In our hands-on session it became oddly satisfying to walk back around the *DriveClub* booths to see other racers still attempting to best the speed challenge we set hours before, and it is here where Evolution's latest will likely define its place in the market. *DriveClub* will compel you to drive better, race faster, and set personal bests – much like EA's *SSX* revival achieved – in an attempt to carve your name into the asphalt of iconic tracks. This all hinges on the community that forms around it, and we fear *DriveClub* may get lost in the shuffle to next-gen. We pray it doesn't, as this compelling racer has the capability to break and build friendships.



■ Above: The *MotorStorm* days of Evolution are over it seems, as *DriveClub* aims to deliver an authentic racing experience without compromising its core fun factor.



“Ask your mom”

HIDEKI KAMIYA, A STANDARD RESPONSE TO BAD TWITTER QUESTIONS



A niche game on a console with a tiny userbase, *Bayonetta* certainly has the commercial odds stacked against it. But why should we care about that?

Bayonetta 2

CONCEPT *Bayonetta 2* brings us more narrative gibberish and hair-powered attacks, as the natural successor to *Devil May Cry* turns up on Wii U.

Platinum's attempt to help the Wii U out of its hairy situation

***Bayonetta 2* is the sequel you asked for, even if it's not necessarily on the console you wanted.** It's so in line with the chaotic 2010 hack-and-slash title that suddenly conquered the once Capcom-dominated genre, with a near-identical visual style, audio cues and precision-based combat, the kind of safe hardcore-centric draw that Nintendo is clearly gunning for on Wii U.

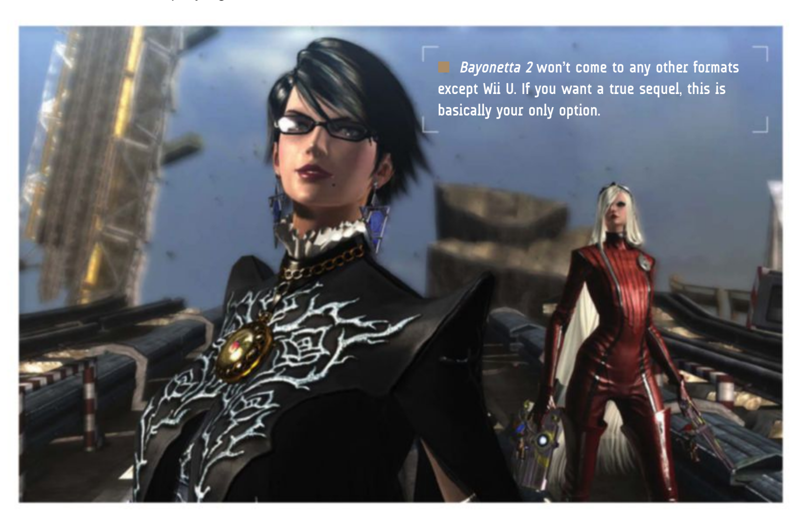
What seemed scaled up in the demo we played was the spectacle of *Bayonetta*'s attacks. It could be that the version of the character we were playing was levelled up to maximum, or that our skills with the instinct-driven framework of *Bayonetta* have remained sharp in the intervening years, but it felt a lot easier to pull of some her more visually exotic combos. We had no trouble beating the demo's atypical angel-like enemies that ambush you on the moving piece of scenery that the level's set on, and the climactic encounter with a giant black dragon-esque creature really was as simple as dodge, hit, dodge hit.

The game looks and feels familiar, true, but it's positive to us that *Bayonetta* gets another chance, and that there's no burden to extract the trademark weirdness from the franchise in order to account for the shift to a new platform. *Bayonetta* still feels like a creator's piece – don't expect that credibility to elude the finished product. The one slightly misfiring element in its journey to the Wii U is the way it utilises the tablet functions, which won't be massively surprising to anyone who knows how important it is to have a controller in-hand with *Bayonetta*.

To control *Bayonetta 2* by swiping the screen with a stylus goes against the delicate, precision-based play that defined the original – it's nice to have the option, we suppose, yet we didn't get much more than a random sense of feedback out of this feature before switching back to regular controls.

It appears we're reaching the same phenomenon we had with the Wii Remote and 3D slider on the 3DS; only *Wind Waker HD*'s use of the screen to manage inventory and use binoculars impresses so far, and everything else feels bolted-on. Instead, we can see *Bayonetta*'s functionality in this being a draw for new players breezing through on Easy Automatic, and unappealing to its traditional audience.

Yet *Bayonetta*'s hardcore following gets absolutely everything else in what appears to be a wholly faithful sequel. Even if the choice of platform frustrates you, it's positive to us that Platinum gets another stab at its most famous franchise.



Bayonetta 2 won't come to any other formats except Wii U. If you want a true sequel, this is basically your only option.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Platinum Games
Release: 2014
Genre: Hack-and-slash
Players: 1

Developer Profile

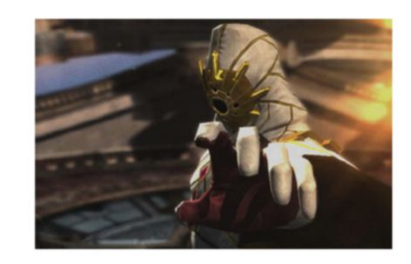
The studio that formed out of Capcom spin-off Clover still hasn't had a smash hit, unfortunately, with *Metal Gear Rising* performing reasonably and *Bayonetta* finding a cult audience. Its games are tonally distinctive, however, which is ever more valuable to us in today's boxed title market.

Developer History

Mad World **2009 [Wii]**
Bayonetta **2010 [Multi]**
Vanquish **2010 [Multi]**
Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance **2012 [Multi]**

High Point

Bayonetta would be too obvious in this case. Vanquish demonstrated Platinum's status as the cult developer of choice for those who miss the old, innovative days of PS2-era Capcom.



SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

LIEGE

Format: Multi
Publisher: Coda Games
Developer: John Rhee
ETA: 2014



ROCKETING PAST its Kickstarter goal in a couple of days, *Liege* is channelling the tactical design of *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Fire Emblem*, and fusing it with a beautiful hand-drawn art style. Pitched as a trilogy, there is a worry that Coda Games has bitten off a little more than it can chew with its debut title, but the early tech demos inspire more confidence than we usually afford to Kickstarter projects.

HARVEST

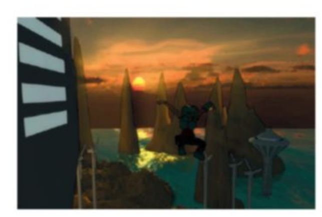
Format: PC
Publisher: GondeFire Productions
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2014



FOLLOWING THE release of *Castle Dracula*, GondeFire has returned to Kickstarter to fund its second project, *Harvest*. Inspired by adventure games lost in the ether of time, it echoes the world of *Blade Runner* as it puts players into the shoes of a detective searching for the missing saviours of humanity. The project was just shy of adding Wii U and PS-Vita support, but success will hopefully see it added in the future.

ENERGY HOOK

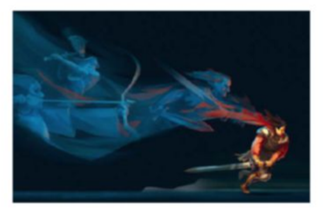
Format: PC
Publisher: Happion Laboratories
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



ENERGY HOOK is an exciting project from Jamie Fristrom, technical director and designer of *Spider-Man 2*. Credited with creating Spidey's immensely fun swinging mechanic, *Energy Hook* is fusing the same mechanic with the score-chasing antics of games like *Tony Hawks: Pro Skater* and *SSX*. The funding went well enough to guarantee Oculus Rift support and a whole host of new animation and move sets.

MASSIVE CHALICE

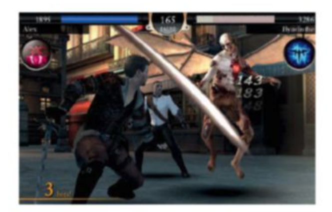
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Double Fine
Developer: In-house
ETA: September 2014



IT WASN'T nearly as popular as *Broken Age*, but *Massive Chalice* easily eclipsed its funding goal. The latest project from the creators of *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend* is a single-player turn-based tactics game told over multiple generations of a family. It's planned for a 2014 release date, and is still only planned for PC and Mac formats, though Double Fine is hopeful it will make it to other platforms.

BLOODMASQUE

Format: iOS
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



FACE-MAPPING in games is *so Tony Hawks Underground 2* circa 2005, right? Wrong. Square Enix is bringing it back for quirky iOS title *Bloodmasque*, where you map your face onto a vampire hunter's body before embarking on an *Infinity Blade*-esque adventure. Developed in Unreal Engine, the steampunk-inspired city looks great on an iPad retina screen and the face-mapping tech appears functional.

SOUL SAGA

Format: Multi
Publisher: Disastercake
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2014



ONE-MAN DEVELOPMENT teams are a tricky business, but *Soul Saga* is a genuinely interesting passion project. This J-RPG, inspired by *Dragons Breath* and *Persona*, is shaping up beautifully – with an aspiration to return gamers to a time challenging, turn-based strategy that doesn't fall by the wayside of overbearing plot. If you are less than keen on what *Final Fantasy* has become, check this out.

TALES OF XILLIA 2

Format: PS3
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2014



WE MAY only just be getting around to reviewing *Tales Of Xillia* in the issue of **games™** that you hold in your hands, but Japanese RPG fans have been enjoying the sequel for months now. Thankfully, Namco Bandai has revealed that *Tales Of Xillia 2* is being localised for European and North American gamers with a 2014 release in mind. Plenty of time to get through the first *Xillia*.

RYSE: SON OF ROME

Format: Xbox One
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Crytek
ETA: 2013



RYSE: SON Of Rome drew its fair share of criticism following E3, as Crytek revealed a beautiful but seemingly shallow launch title for the Xbox One. The *Crysis* developer seems to have taken this feedback on board, promising that not only will the studio implement a fail state for special executions, but will also include a difficulty that removes the QTE prompts entirely. That would be welcome.



ANNOUNCED – One Piece: Romance Dawn (3DS)

Namco Bandai has delighted us by announcing that *One Piece: Romance Dawn* will be making its way to Europe later this year. Sadly the publisher also ruled out a North American release. We'll be sure to tell you all about it.



ANNOUNCED – Cooking Mama 5 (3DS)

For those who can't bring themselves to jump into the kitchen in real life, it seems *Cooking Mama Limited* is already developing the fifth instalment to the unusually popular series, with a 3DS release planned for 2014.

CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **Infinity Ward**
ETA: **5 November 2013**



THE RIDICULOUS discussion of Riley the German Shepherd has detracted from Infinity Ward's latest, but the pre-order exclusive multiplayer map Free Fall sounds exciting, as it reshapes the battleground as games progress. Set in a destroyed skyscraper that has collided with a building, line of sight and walking paths shift as the building crumbles. Echoes EA's *Battlefield* Levolution tech, but sounds impressive.

WHORE OF THE ORIENT

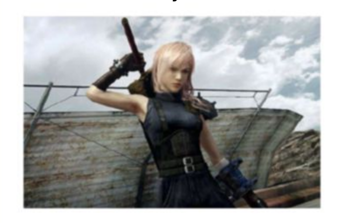
Format: **TBA**
Publisher: **Team Bondi**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



L.A NOIRE developer Team Bondi's *Whore Of The Orient* has resurfaced, auspiciously hovering above the 'Vapourware' branding. KMM, who owns the property, was granted $200,000 from the New South Wales' Interactive Media Fund to assist with development. While not enough to get *Whore Of The Orient* in a playable state, it indicates the team is still hard at work on the drama set in 1936, Shanghai.

LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII

Format: **Xbox 360, PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **23 February 2014**



FANS STILL lamenting the lack of an HD remake for seminal J-RPG *Final Fantasy VII* may take comfort in discovering a Cloud Strife costume, complete with buster sword, will be available to early adopters of *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*. The final chapter in *Lightning*'s bloated saga, the title displays perhaps the most diverse systems we've seen in a *Final Fantasy* game. It sure looks intriguing.

DEMON GAZE

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Kadokawa Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



IT'S ALWAYS a nice surprise when niche Japanese titles make their way to Europe and North America, so we feel inclined to extend our gratitude to NIS America for picking the dungeon crawling RPG up. *Demon Gaze* lets you capture souls and utilise them in battles as allies – the gameplay and combat are relatively simple to grasp, but they're also deceptively rewarding. Expect it to land early in 2014.

PLANETSIDE 2

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **SOE**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



WE'VE REPORTED on how popular multiplayer FPS *PlanetSide 2* will make the jump from PC to PlayStation 4 this year, still holding onto its free-to-play status. SOE has downplayed the idea of cross-play between the two versions at launch, so the opportunity for mouse and keyboard devotees to go head-to-head with controller jockeys will have to wait for the showdown of a console generation.

FIREFALL

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Red 5 Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



WE'VE BEEN waiting for this for what feels like forever, but *Firefall* is finally entering open beta. By the time this issue of **games™** is in your hands you'll be able to sign up via the official website and jump into the MMO FPS hybrid for yourself. *Firefall* is striving to bring the difficulty and progression back to the genre. Not long before we see if *Firefall* is a success or another shadow of *World Of Warcraft*.

MERCENARY KINGS

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Tribute Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



REMEMBER *SCOTT Pilgrim Vs. The World*, the wildly addictive co-operative RPG romp through Bryan Lee O'Malley's best work? Well Tribute Games is back with *Mercenary Kings*, and it's channelling the times that have been lost since the arcade scene's demise. It's entering Steam Early Access now and will introduce players to its wonderful fusion of *Metal Slug* meets *Borderlands*.

MECHWARRIOR ONLINE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Infinite Games Publishing**
Developer: **Piranha Games**
ETA: **September 2013**



PIRANHA'S FREE-TO-PLAY *MechWarrior Online* has been in open-beta for close to a year, but is receiving a solid release in September. If Hawken isn't to your tastes, this simulation-take on battlefield warfare with all manner of mechs will surely satisfy. If you've been part of the open beta not only will your data carry across to the final build, but you'll also receive a limited edition mech on day one as a thank you.

IMITATION OF LIFE



The Sims Studio finally cuts the strings on its creation. In a games™ exclusive, we find out how The Sims 4 breathes new life into the billion dollar dollhouse

Sunday 20 October, 1991. A large urban conflagration blazes across the hillsides of Oakland, California, consuming over 3,500 homes within its deadly Diablo winds in a period of 72 hours. Among those affected is *SimCity* designer Will Wright, who returns in the days following the disaster to discover the remains of his home in incinerated ruins. This is, surprisingly, a good thing.

From the ashes, Wright began to piece his life back together – literally one domestic item at a time. A refrigerator, cooker, sofa and a variety of other furniture soon rejuvenated his feng shui. But for Wright, this design for life quickly became an obsession, one that constructed the rudimentary foundations for what would become his newest simulator, titled *Home Tactics: The Experimental Domestic Simulator*. Nearly nine years later it would be known, quite simply, as *The Sims*.

The franchise has grown somewhat significantly since 2000. Three mainline entries and an exhausting litany of expansion packs and spin-offs have catapulted Wright's dollhouse from a concept that apparently spurred twelve-year-old boys to sprint out of focus groups, to one of the biggest brands in entertainment. It has transitioned from original developer Maxis to the purpose-built offshoot The Sims Studio located at EA's Redwood City offices south of San Francisco – which is conveniently where **games™** finds itself today.





Much like a trip to Ikea, you can outfit your abode with a ready-made design, saving hours painstakingly matching your wallpaper with your bedsheets.

We're lingering under an oversized PlumbBob (the iconic hexagonal bipyramid that hovers above each Sim) in reception, which is currently radiating a hospitable green hue. We suspect that this is its default tone, but it could easily be a reflection of the studio's affable attitude during our visit. We step inside a formal boardroom to find a rally of producers lined against the wall standing in mutual hushed enthusiasm, while a laptop roars to life and introduces us to *The Sims 4*.

"I swear, I dream about *The Sims* in my sleep," admits lead producer Lyndsay Pearson, as we're familiarised with the various members of the team at the start of the presentation – most of which are veterans of the franchise from its nascent years. "I started working on *The Sims* on *Unleashed* – that expansion pack way back for the original *The Sims*," she continues. "I've been on three base games, lots and lots of expansion packs. I love being part of it. But before I worked here, I actually played *The Sims*. And like many people my first experience was my Sim making breakfast and starting a fire. That was a good way to start."

"For us, it all begins with life. All the nuance, complexity and delight of being human," beams executive producer Rachel Franklin, explaining the studio's approach to the sequel. "We put these all together to create intelligent, emotionally rich and more believable Sims. We've brought together the mind, body and heart. Our virtual little people are thinking, emotional beings now." It all sounds ominously like Sims might turn self-aware in the sequel, but the truth is that this approach addresses a more mature and intelligent simulation. In *The Sims 4*, tangible emotional states replace the simplistic mood system inherent to each Sim, which The Sims Studio hopes will establish an empathetic connection between player and avatar.

"For *The Sims 4* we're actually really going back to the Sims themselves and giving them an entirely new dimension," continues Franklin. "Adding this emotional aspect is opening up all kinds of new gameplay for us. To do this we actually have a totally new set of technology and tools that are underpinning all of our systems under our gameplay, powering our creative tools, powering our animations and all of the gameplay itself."

Indeed, and within each of the handful of emotional states – including happy, sad, inspired and depressed, among others – are a range of nuances that will unlock contextual actions. An angry Sim might take out its frustration on a stuffed animal by tearing it to shreds; a sad Sim might opt for wallowing in self-pity during a 'sad shower'. But these extreme mindsets will also offer boons: the angry Sim could see marked improvement at the gym during a cathartic workout; a sad Sim might create a work of art inspired


Attention has been paid creating more expressive Sims. Socialising Sims will wildly gesticulate and feature a wider suite of facial movements.

by their misery. The range of concomitant interactions spawns intriguing possibilities that'll encourage players to manipulate Sims into bipolar swings of temperament to experience everything the game has to offer.

"Luckily, we have a lot of people that happen to be real people and have real life experiences," laughs Pearson. "We have a huge well to draw from, so one person will say 'When I'm angry, this is what I do' or 'When I'm sad, this is what I do.' We want each of those progressions and each of those emotions to feel really rich and deep and different. You'll see different content unlock, different socials unlock and different outcomes unlock within a bunch of different factors in the game – the way you get through skills, careers, the way you get through your day. So there's a lot of emergence in there that people will get to explore for a long time."

Naturally, moodlets contribute to reflect situations and events as they have done in the past, while clothing and the surroundings will also feed into the emotion of a Sim. Furniture can be purchased through an Ikea-like catalogue, offering a range of items that directly influence how a Sim feels within the environment – for example, an inspirational painting could boost the creativity of a Sim. Of course, there's a risk that tethering emotional charges to everyday items could create a vapid household of conveniently appeased Sims, or worse, commonplace objects awarding arbitrary buffs.

"We spent a lot of time tuning that," Pearson explains. "It has a lot to do with the weight we give any particular thing. Though it might be we decide that we give a flirty painting and that may give you an impact if you're in a flirty mood – like if it's in your bedroom and it's your little love nest and it'll enhance that. It's not that if you have a flirty painting in your bathroom and walk in the door then all of a sudden you'll be flirty. It's not that crazy. So it has a lot to do with how we weigh the importance of those things. There are going to be certain things that will have a big impact that'll change your emotion right away, but others are going to have to be accumulative and add up to changing your emotion overall."

> "We're going back to the Sims themselves and giving them an entirely new dimension"

The Sims has always catered for humanity's deviant side. Talk to anyone who played the original and they'll recall spending hours placing their Sims in tortuous situations (pro tip: direct all the Sims towards the pool and then remove the ladders). Yes, it's within the darkest subset of imagination that *The Sims* has always seemed to thrive and the prospect of actions causing a profound psychological impact in *The Sims 4* will no doubt drive players to new heights of sociopathy.

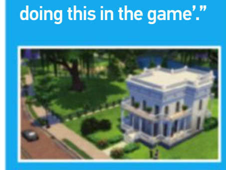
Pearson and Franklin are sitting together during lunch, laughing as they spitball a combination of environmental objects that could kick a Sim over the edge. A sad painting on a wall, a sad song on the radio and a sad television programme – unsurprisingly, this makes for a rather miserable Sim. "We've always had that deviant aspect," says Pearson. "What we've tried to do is, even in those really dark places – that in the real world are really hard for people to deal with – we've tried to put a funny spin on it." She goes on to give an example: a Sim who suffers a bladder leakage will continue to carry indignity for some time before dying of embarrassment. "We'll also have that you might be so hysterically happy that you giggle yourself to death," she adds.



THE SIMS EXCHANGE

Expanding the community features in The Sims 4

An overlooked area of *The Sims* has been The Sims Exchange – an online community nurtured by The Sims Studio that enables users to both submit and download custom mods for each title. *The Sims 4* wants to make creation accessible, and producer Lyndsay Pearson predicts that the new tools will galvanise the community: "We think by letting these tools be more fun, more useable and more powerful for people who might not have tried it before that will also hopefully galvanise them to want to share creations and say 'Hey I'm good at this too, look what I made.' And then make that experience easier for people who want to opt into that." The Sims Exchange is set to be an embedded aspect of the *Sims* experience. "We love when we're launching a game to see everything that the community makes and generates – it's always the best part of launching any *Sims* game," says producer Ryan Vaughan. "We design it in a way that we think people are going to play with it and then they go back and create these creations that make us say 'How did they do that? I never thought of doing this in the game'."



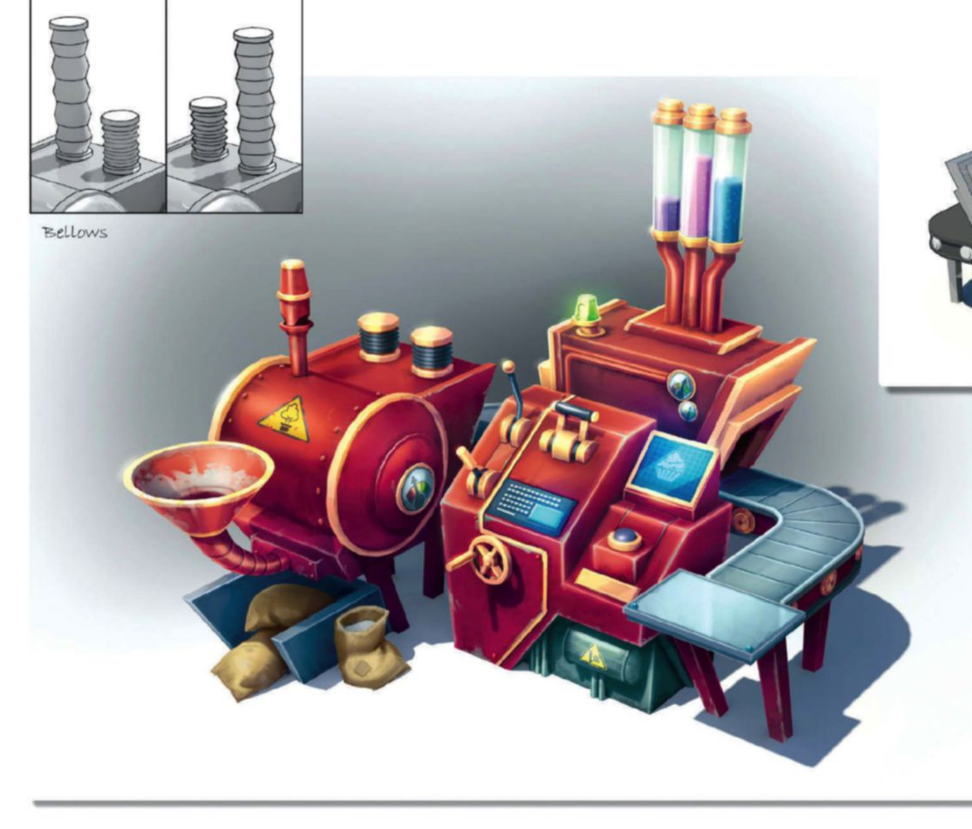








Create-A-Sim is a more tactile process, enabling you to drag your avatar into the perfect Sim.



"We balance it with a quirky take on it to make it not go to that dark place that people go to in reality and come at it from a 'Simsy' point of view."

But it's not simply a case of offering a diverse spectrum of psychological states, but being able to convey the nuances of each mood effectively. We stop by animation director, Goopy Rossi, who demonstrates some of the advanced facial animations and mannerisms that'll communicate emotion to the player. The ways in which a Sim walks, wakes up in the morning and approaches other Sims have all been acutely detailed to reflect the current mood of the Sim. Rossi also highlights group behaviour as another key area that the studio sought to advance, creating more believable social situations.

"In *Sims 2* and *3* we added group behaviour much later in expansion packs," says Rossi. "It was really more about [basic] interaction and the group stuff came later, and it was always hard to layer that over, so we want to make sure that the core system supported group behaviour. When multiple Sims are interacting with each other, it happens in a natural way."

Rossi plays a video that borders on voyeuristic – surveillance footage of an internal social event and how staff interacted in groups. People shuffle to accommodate others joining the discussion, large personalities emerge through wild gesticulation and subtle movements shape the flow of conversation. "We've effectively taken that intelligence and translated it into the algorithms that control the grouping of the Sims," adds creative director Ray Mazza. "We're also giving players control over groups of Sims. You can now tell Sims when they're in groups to do things together. 'Go over there together,' or click on a basketball hoop and select 'shoot hoops together.' It makes it really easy to do things together, rather than orchestrate each Sim individually." This impeccable replication of naturalistic human behaviour extends to being able to navigate through narrow gaps and doorways without causing a blockage. But by far the most fundamental improvement is the Sims' newfound ability to multitask and Mazza jumps into an example of how the system will streamline gameplay. "Your Sim can go to the gym and you can have your Sim hop on the treadmill and then watch the home and garden channel on the TV – so she's gaining a little gardening skill and getting fit on the treadmill. Then a guy walks up next to her and starts bench-pressing, and she decides she wants to flirt with this Sim. She can do that without having to get off the treadmill, walk around that Sim and kick him out of the object. They can just do this as they're exercising. They can form a relationship, fulfilling their social needs and gaining some skills. It looks natural, it feels good and it's more strategic."

> "The most fundamental improvement is the Sims' newfound ability to multitask"

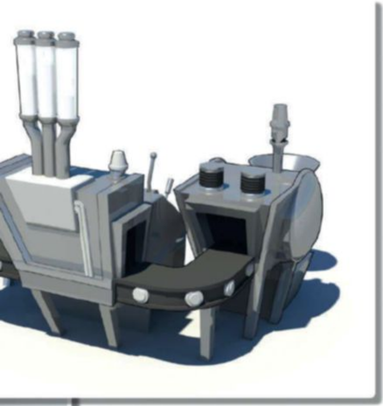
It'll also have other social benefits. "Sims can now double-fist drinks," laughs Mazza, "That'll certainly help with group interactions."

Imagine the title screen of Super Mario 64. The eponymous hero launches towards the screen, his facial features shift enthusiastically in motion. Using the cursor, you pinch and pull his chubby features to contort the iconic mascot's jolly face. It's tactile, responsive, but, above all else, it's fun.

To make a sweeping generalisation: character creation, for the most part, is none of those things.

"This really sets us apart from any other *Sims* games we've made so far," says associate producer Jill Johnston, self-







There will be plenty of new items designed for *The Sims 4*. This cupcake making machine takes up a lot of room and won't do a lot for the waistline, but the buffs are well worth it.



Sims 4 AMA

We asked one fervent Sims player to grill The Sims Studio on the issues that matter most

I want to be able to create a Sim using facial recognition. Is that possible now?

Lyndsay Pearson (Producer): We've had people ask that for a long time. That would be pretty cool, but our Sims have a specific art style, because we don't want people to feel bad about torturing their Sims. We want them to be a stylised toy.

Will the food look more appetising in the sequel?

Ryan Vaughan (Producer): I think we're all really excited about the art style of *The Sims 4*, and how that ties into the Sims' emotional states as well. Food is going to have an emotional impact on your Sims. So not only is it going to look very in-tune with this style that we hope is pervasive throughout the community, but food is going to give your Sim an emotional state too.

Why don't they speak English?

Pearson: Every so often that one pops up again. My favourite way it comes up is on the forum and people are like 'Are they talking Russian?' They think it's some other language. But Simlish serves a very good purpose for us. It's an opportunity for players to impose their emotions on the Sims and imagine what they're talking about. One of my favourite examples was back in *Sims 2* there was a penguin that shows up and went and talked to the snowman about hot soup. That's just mean! But Simlish is a tool for us and we like leaving it up to your imagination. *The Sims 4* gives an emotional connotation to the Simlish, so they'll actually sound sad or happy.





Can the Sims' fashion style be more contemporary?

Pearson: Our lead in the area of picking out clothing assets is very fashionable for a reason. We think a lot about that.

I want to do some home improvements. Can I take a loan out from the bank and build a house with it?

Pearson: That's an interesting idea. We've tossed it around for different Sim things in the past, we haven't bit it off yet but it's something that would potentially be cool down the line.

> "We don't want people to feel bad about torturing their Sims. We want them to be a stylised toy"

Can I follow my Sims to work and interact with colleagues?

Pearson: That's hard.

Vaughan: Our core system has events now where you'll be able to go out and play through certain parts of your career. There will be social aspects to that too, where you're out interacting with other Sims and moving up the career ladder as you control that Sim.

Could there be an app that enables me to customise and interact with my Sims 4 game on mobile?

Vaughan: That's a great idea and part of what we're looking at now too as we finish off this really solid foundation of the game. We're making sure that it's built in such a way that we can add stuff like that when we hear really great ideas.



confessed Create-A-Sim enthusiast, who explains *The Sims 4*'s leap forward in Sim creation. "Our main goal is to advance ease-of-use, tactility and power of the tool. It's kind of like reaching in, grabbing, pulling and moving the Sim yourself. It's like moulding clay – but not so messy." The *Super Mario 64* analogy is rather apt; players can use the mouse to tweak facial structure, body proportions, and overall shape to create more diverse Sims. There are several levels of detail at work, zooming in to stretch eyelid width, tug at pupil size and even noodle the nostrils if you so desire and even dictate the style in which they walk around their environment.

Johnston jolts through a quick demonstration of the new system, creating herself in Sim form within a matter of minutes – pulling the default avatar in various directions, painting on muscle definition and stretching various appendages. She points out a couple of other improvements: randomisation has even been overhauled, creating smarter match-ups of clothing to create a more consistent dress sense for the fashion conscious; elsewhere hats, boots and other items are now more versatile to allow for compatibility for a range of hair and clothing styles.

But if in the past there have always been two types of players – those that pour over every microscopic detail and others who let the simulation run – then these steps to streamline the creation tools could easily converge the two distinct playstyles. "There are so many different ways to play it," says producer Ryan Vaughan. "There are players that just love to build and create and the tools in this game are so much fun to play with – that's what I've always wanted out of the game. Grabbing on and moving the Sim's face that way, adjusting the ears. It's the same with Build Mode – you'll be able to plonk down a room and then pick it up and move it over."

We're given a demonstration by game designer Aaron Houts, who delves into the new systems in place: "We looked at Build in past games – and you can do powerful stuff with it – but for some people it was kind of daunting to jump in," he states. "You had to plan out what you wanted to make if you wanted something good. So we thought 'How can we make this flexible, keep the power to be able to make cool stuff, but make it easier to just jump in and start playing with it and start discovering along the way?' We designed a system called 'Blocks' and they are... well, building blocks for the house."

It's rare for a concept to actually be simpler than a developer's proclamations, but creating a luxurious abode takes far less time and patience than in previous iterations. You place a ready-formed structure (with walls and floor already attached) based on a catalogue of shapes, and manipulate its parameters, stretching walls and surfaces, tweaking objects – such as the pitch, curvature and overhang of roofs – all the time the infrastructure adapts to the alterations on-the-fly. It promotes freeform creativity, spurring more diversity in community creations.

"The tools in this game are something that I'm both proud and really excited about, says Vaughan when he joins **games™** shortly after the demonstration. "I'm a builder myself – that's my playstyle – and the power behind them is really strong. Building and creating your Sims is something that I have a lot of fun with now. A lot of players in the past have really invested themselves in these very intricate buildings, which you can still do in *Sims 4*, but now you are able to grab these blocks, grab these rooms, and put stuff together quickly. If you don't like it then pull it apart and put it back together in another way. It's not 'Oh, I've got to destroy this whole lot and start over.' It's really about being tactile, like you're playing with blocks almost. You can do it and intuitiveness behind it makes it that much more fun so that you can able to get creative and push the game towards how *you* want to see it."

> "It's kind of like reaching in, grabbing and pulling the Sim yourself. It's like moulding clay"

games™ is listening to Joshua Radin. When *The Sims 4* arrives in 2014, players will be listening to Joshua Radin. Unlike us, however, they probably won't realise it. The singer-songwriter – whose music can often be heard buoying a particularly melodramatic moment of adolescent angst in any number of US teen dramas – has not only lent his soothing tones to the game, but has performed an original track completely in Simlish. In fact, he's one of 300 artists who have recorded songs in the fictitious, nonsensical dialogue of the series' inhabitants over the years.

It's indicative of the phenomenon that *The Sims* has become, spawning a multitude of offshoots in the 13 years since the first entry was released. Massively-multiplayer, mobile and even medieval iterations have all played a part in defining *The Sims* between each numerical entry. Pearson acknowledges the audience diversity, suggesting *The Sims 4* will create a solid gameplay foundation that will enable the studio to incorporate features from other titles in the series' history. "There are so many different people that play and so many different things to learn," she says. "Our focus for building *Sims 4* is 'How do we make the right base for any of those possibilities in the future? How do we create that foundation so that, in the future, as it makes sense to appeal to those different types of audiences, we could look at that and figure out how to go there?'"

It's clear that The Sims Studio is keeping the focus firmly on the benefits of single-player. Conversation swings towards the more emotive Sims, their complex relationships (see p69), the expanded Aspirations system – featuring intermediate goals along the way and wide-reaching progression branches – and the minimalist UI. It's no surprise that, after the debacle surrounding *SimCity*'s always-online policy, broaching the subject of multiplayer and interconnected neighbourhoods is cannily evaded (NeoGaf can breathe a sigh of relief: *The Sims 4* will be playable offline).

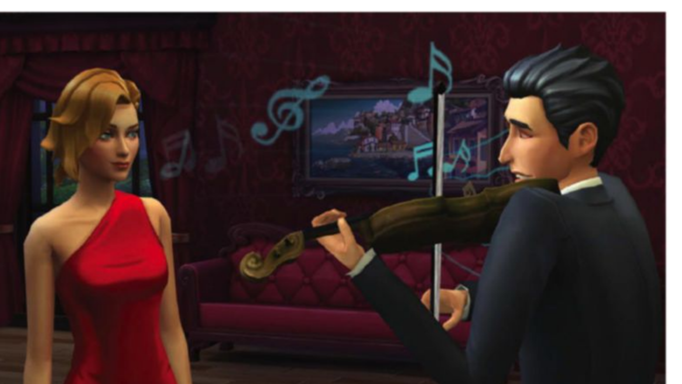
And it's no surprise to find that the studio sparks with enthusiasm for the title's much-vaunted new features. Every facet of *The Sims 4* has been layered with a huge amount of depth, while care has been paid to make it more accessible than ever. For a team that has been deeply entrenched in the franchise for years, the fire fuelling its passion for driving Sims forwards looks to be in no risk of extinguishing any time soon.



Build Mode takes its cue from Create-A-Sim, enabling players to intuitively construct a property by dragging and dropping rooms, removing any needless fiddling.

The carnivorous Cow Plant makes a welcome return in *The Sims 4*. It's an easy way of dispatching any unwanted house guests.

Queueing up tasks isn't such a chore anymore. Sims will now continue conversations and socialising while undertaking other activities.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The Sims 4 offers more complex relationships with your fellow neighbours, as producer Ryan Vaughan explains

"Relationships are a big part of the game. It's important in *The Sims 4* how your Sims interact with the other Sims around them, and the emotional states that they go through and how that affects the relationship." So instead of one relationship bar that can grow incrementally through friendship and into a romantic bond, *The Sims 4* has two concurrent bars – romance and friendship. This offers the possibility of soul mates – couples that max out both metres – while the balance could be swayed so that, in theory, you have a friend-with-woo-hoo-benefits deal with someone you know.




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ATTACK

MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT TELLS GAMES™ HOW HYBRID MMO-SHOOTER THE DIVISION IS SET TO SHINE A LIGHT THROUGH THE APOCALYPTIC DARKNESS

am Fisher is dead. Rainbow Six wiped out. And H.A.W.X, well, no one really cares about them. As society is ravaged by a relentless global contagion, as the United States sits on the precipice of an apocalypse, it's the pillars of Tom Clancy's universe that are first to crumble. Those teams aren't designed to deal with mid-crisis scenarios but, thankfully, out of the rubble emerges a new hope for mankind.

The Division itself is a government agency comprised of sleeper agents, set up to deal with the fallout from a deadly pandemic if the other units of the befuddling Clancyverse (of which spans nearly 50 titles) fail to shoot things properly. It's a requisitely high-concept and bombastic conceit that'd no doubt make its namesake's berretta sweat, but the basis for narrative is disconcertingly founded in real-world government contingency measures. Based on a 2001 study that documented how quickly America would fall apart in the face of viral adversity, the Dark Winter exercise became a portentous catalyst for the project.

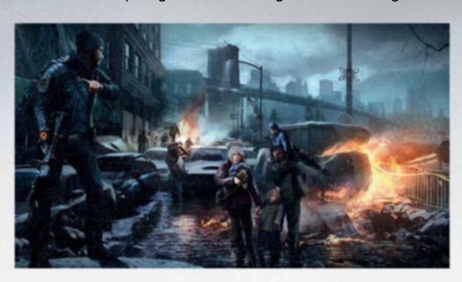
"In their simulation, they released a smallpox virus into Oklahoma City and within two to three weeks it spiralled out of control," producer Fredrik Rundqvist casually informs **games™** when explaining the influence behind *The Division*. "The US basically started to shut down, and the whole country started collapsing. That's the seed of our [game]." »

» The virus spread quickly, over one million US citizens were dead within six weeks, food and water had stopped circulating and the virus has spread to 25 US states and 13 foreign countries. *The Division* takes this scenario and elevates it to DEFCON 1. And while the game may bear the commercially savvy Tom Clancy branding, it certainly isn't beholden to any specific source material, enabling Massive to weave an open-ended narrative.

"We were thinking about what kind of Clancy unit or agency would make sense in this scenario. How would they train? What would they be ready for? We looked at simulations of this type of exercise to see how they failed," says Rundqvist. "So we imagined this overlay of highly professional disaster specialists that don't have to work within the normal agencies, because what always happens in these disaster scenarios is that you want to be decentralised, you want to be flexible, you want to be sustained, so all the big structures crumble when you don't have the usual logistics, the usual supplies coming in. Things are really bad and society has started to close down, and you see all these new factions arising as law enforcement and military, structures crumble, but at the same time you're an agent of hope. You're there to try and fix this."

The project promotes relatively unknown Swedish studio Ubisoft Massive (previously Massive Entertainment) on equal footing with the French publisher's most prominent internal teams after assisting on various projects. Prior to its acquisition in 2008, the studio launched *Ground Control* and *World In Conflict* and since has notched *The Lost Archive* DLC for *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* and the oft-overlooked multiplayer appendage of *Far Cry 3* to its portfolio. While *The Division* is the studio's first solo venture for the publisher, it's a project the team has been harbouring for the last three years.

THIS WAS SOMETHING [UBISOFT] HAD BEEN THINKING ABOUT FOR A LONG TIME," STATES RUNDQVIST. "UBISOFT ASKED US TO START THINKING ABOUT HOW TO BRING TOM CLANCY INTO THE RPG GENRE. THERE ARE A LOT OF US ON THE TEAM THAT HAVE WORKED on RPGs in the past, and we're very passionate about that genre, so we started to think about how to update the franchise." Dropping players into a midwinter New York City three weeks after the outbreak, Massive's new Snowdrop engine is delivering the familiar sights of the Big Apple in disarray. Snowflakes swirl through the sky and clouds hang overhead, while the echo of gunfire and an energetic jolt of wanton environmental destruction is never far away. In much the same way as Naughty Dog's *The Last Of Us* found beauty in humankind's eradication, The Division paints a similarly haunting visage of the apocalypse. "We started doing the tech before we were doing the game. Specifically, designing the new [Snowdrop] engine to take advantage of the next generation features and next generation specs," Rundqvist says. "It's quite a leap from the current gen. If you're in a contemporary setting, the type of scenario that we like to bring to gamers, the immersion, the realism, is very important. Just adding more power to the machines, you can do more real physics, procedural destruction, you can do global illumination, you can do all these things to make it feel like a living breathing world. You can't do that to the same extent on current-gen."







CARRY THE CRISIS IN YOUR POCKET

UBISOFT MASSIVE envisioned a gameplay experience where you are always connected. We received a brief glimpse at the implementation of tablets in *The Division*, where a friend can connect to your game via an app and assist you. As long as you have an internet connection, you could be fighting alongside your friends.



1 The drone's display gives your friend wielding the tablet a birds-eye view of the ensuing battle in rendered 3D, and any actions they take in your game will stay with it in the long run. "Whatever support or damage they do in the world, that stays. It's part of the persistent world," says Rundqvist.

2 The drone is able to lay down covering fire and flag enemies. It's not just a fleeting implementation, though; Massive approached *The Division* with greater connectivity in mind. "We challenged our engineers, around two years back," says Rundqvist, "to make something that's really meaningful, both for the tablet player and the guys with the consoles."

3 While Ubisoft is clearly inspired by Microsoft's SmartGlass and Sony with PS Vita, Rundqvist and Massive is concerned about balancing the inclusion of tablet play. "It's always challenging to balance a game where you have multiple talent skills, weapons, with multiple players who want it to feel fun and rewarding but also challenging."

4 The drone will also come with its own set of progressions and upgradeable skills, with Massive eager to give players a reason to put down their controller and pick up an iPad instead. "That's why we came up with this real-time interaction concept, where you basically control a drone with a tablet that has its own progression, its own skill, within the HD client".

"UBISOFT ASKED US TO START THINKING ABOUT HOW TO BRING TOM CLANCY INTO THE RPG GENRE"

● *The Division*'s initial reveal was set in Manhattan but all five boroughs will play a part in creating a believable New York.



● Ubisoft Massive has been in the shadows since its acquisition in 2008, this will be the studio's first major release since *World In Conflict*.



While plenty of noise has been made since the reveals of the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 regarding the improved technical fidelity, the truly exciting advancements come from the types of worlds ambitious developers will be able to create. "I think it's the sheer size of [the open-worlds], and within them how many people can be online at the same time, how immersive you can make the world, and keep it one large map at the same time," Rundqvist says, adding. "It's a mix of all that stuff, and I think you're going to see it with all these new kinds of big world, online games because we couldn't do that in the past." If these early reveals can be defined by any marketing spiel, it's that of the 'living-breathing world'. Next gen is set to deliver expansive experiences that console owners aren't traditionally familiar with, as *The Division* – much like *The Crew*, Bungie's *Destiny* and Respawn's *Titanfall* – all look towards MMOs as a source of inspiration, blurring the lines between massively multiplayer worlds and tight single-player experiences.

"I think it's safe to say we have a lot of MMO players on the team, and we're trying to pick the best features from RPG games and MMO games," says Rundqvist. "Maybe not adding all of the elements, but trying to pick the best ones to be able to do what we really want, as gamers. The way we designed it is that you will still have a very good experience with the single-player. You can still explore the same content, take on the same challenges, you can still move seamlessly from PvE to PvP, if you wish to do that. You can group up with friends or group up with people with our new matchmaking system, but you can definitely play it on your own."

Unlike traditional online shooters *The Division* will have no set class system, instead players will be able to pick loadouts on the fly depending on the situation. Friends can drop into our map to offer assistance, so you can effectively adapt to harness the holy trinity of squad-based shooters – assault, heavy and support.

Cast your mind back to June and you've seen all of the above in action, and while the expansive backdrop and richly milieu left mouths agape, the fundamental mechanics remain well within the comfort zone of the Clancy mould. Yet, it's the pervasive world and human interactivity that'll no doubt distinguish *The Division* from the hangover associated with its tired branding. How far will you go to survive? Who can you trust? What are the repercussions to your actions? These are the types of questions that *The Division* looks to pose. It also highlights and unlikely influence, with Massive's epic taking cue from Dean Hall's own stress test, *DayZ*. The conceit of both is thus: when pushed to despair, humanity becomes unpredictable.

This is perhaps the best indication of where *The Division* will most likely succeed. In this world, players must band together, form cluster-groups and walk weary of enemies both on the outside and within. It's an encouraging thought and one that transcends its nebulous genre classification, pegging *The Division* as a game built on experiences and personal stories. You can forget about new tech, graphical fidelity and increased processing power, this is what the next-gen is about.







MOLYNEUX ON GODUS

WHEN WE MET WITH PETER MOLYNEUX TO FIND OUT ABOUT GODUS, HIS KICKSTARTER-FUNDED GOD-SIM, THE CONVERSATION COVERED EVERYTHING GOING ON IN TODAY'S INDUSTRY. THAT'S THE THING ABOUT THE FABLE CREATOR – HE ALWAYS HAS SOMETHING TO SAY, AND HE'S ALWAYS WORTH LISTENING TO...



I don't live in that world anymore," Peter Molyneux says, scrolling through his inbox for an example of the open dialogue he now maintains with the gaming community. He skips past a back-and-forth with Microsoft's Phil Spencer. The ethical journalist in us averts its eyes and shifts in its seat, feels invasive, voyeuristic. "Ah, here we go. Yesterday. From Aaron Bailey: 'Why are you so full of shit?'"

Most developers – high or low in the public line of sight – wouldn't respond to that. That Molyneux would – and indeed did – offers eye-opening insight from which his wider attitude towards fan and critic might be derived. Like an emancipated prisoner, he's gambolling in the sunshine just because it feels good, welcoming criticism because, once again, he's free to be open and honest in his response. "I think I'm unfairly famous in the industry," he admits. "Partly because I've been around for so long, partly because I like talking. That's made me unfairly – unjustly – more famous »

In *Godus*, your home-world exists within the context of everybody else's. Mac, Linux, iPad, whatever; they're all linked, making for some stunning and unexpected multiplayer gameplay possibilities.

» than I should be compared to the portfolio of games I've done. I've said to myself, 'Right. If I can just use every ounce of my passion and my dedication to make something that [journalists] and consumers say is great. Because none of my games have really been great. They've been interesting, but they've never been great'."

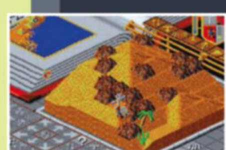
Gamers are a nation of divided opinions. Perhaps that's because games, as a medium, rely on players processing the experience in an abstract or creative way that often cannot be predetermined. When *Fable II* was released, there were those who found themselves awkwardly placed within it. To us, it fit. To us, it was great. "There were bits of *Fable* that were *interesting*," Molyneux grudgingly admits. "I think that the end of *Fable II*, where you had the three choices – even though one of them was broken – that was quite interesting. But that's not greatness, that's interest. What I describe as greatness is something which is just delightful. It's a whole from the first moment you experience the game to the last moment."

According to Pablo Picasso, "Every child is an artist. The problem is staying an artist when you grow up." Here is Peter Molyneux: 54 years old and with as much fire in his belly as a man thirty years his junior. The trick, it would seem, is never to stay still, never to stagnate, nor to descend to drudgery. At Microsoft, he had a safety net from which he's now released.

"Microsoft was a creative padded cell for me," he confesses. "I could throw myself out and around, but never really get myself hurt because there was a lot of infrastructure around you that made sure that you didn't. Being in a small business is like being in a lifeboat with a big leak in it; you're constantly bailing out. You don't know where you're going. You know that you're going somewhere that no one's ever been before, and that's unbelievably exciting. Sometimes you have to bail harder than you ever thought you possibly could.

"At Microsoft, there were people who said,'You know what, Peter? What you're saying to the press – you shouldn't say

A HISTORY OF IDEAS MOLYNEUX MAY BE ABASHED WHEN LIONISED FOR HIS ACHIEVEMENTS, AND YET THEY ARE SPECTACULAR



Populous
Not only the first game of an entire genre, but the first game we ever played over a LAN, connecting an Atari ST to an Amiga, no less, with a re-soldered RST3T cable.



Syndicate
When all else were shooters, *Syndicate* was among the first games to offer something different. You could shoot, sure, but there was also the option to persuade.



Black & White
Black & White was the first commercially successful game to use gesture-based controls, with players having to describe certain shapes using the mouse to create specific spells.



Natural disasters are a deity's greatest weapon. It is not clear at this stage exactly how these work, but don't expect them to come easy. Tidal waves and volcanoes are potentially devastating to neighbouring populations.



Things start small. Just two people, your own Adam and Eve. But through your nurturing, a civilisation will be born. A civilisation that is itself a cipher for your personality. You will reap just what you sow.

that.' [At 22Cans] there's no one there. I can say whatever I want to. And that's both risky and insanely exciting… This is why I left Microsoft: Because I said to them, 'What are you doing? You should be the most exciting thing in the technological universe, and now you're letting Steve Jobs walk away with that prize while you're making something that people don't care about.'

"Technology exists today to create these incredible, insane things. I don't know what it's going to be like. I have no idea if it's going to be the biggest train-wreck disaster, or the start of something. All I know is that I love doing these experimental things and I accept that some people are going to get angry with me, and that they're going to feel disappointed, but I can't stop doing it. It feels like this is what I left Microsoft to do. [When I left] I remembered who I am. And who I am is someone who loves doing this." The *this* he's referring to right now is *Godus*, the Kickstarter-funded pan-format god sim with no meeker aim than to deliver an earthquake to a genre that, arguably, has seen barely a tremor since Molyneux himself was last at its vanguard.

"You begin with your home-world," Molyneux explains, "and you start with these two little people. Then, over days, weeks, months, years, those little people will spread, breed, they'll become more civilised. They'll start off incredibly primitive, not really knowing anything. And depending on how you play, it will affect their civilisation, affect their belief in certain morals, affect what they think is right and wrong, and all that just from playing. You can come in every day, just play around, and the world responds to it."

In concept, it sounds remarkably similar both to *Populous*, released back in, "God knows how long ago that was," [thanks, Peter] and to *Black & White* and its sequel, which took the concept, added physics and AI, great towers and gesture-based controls and giant creatures to awe your swains and do battle to the detriment of anything within range of their cumbersome swipes and crushing falls. But whatever you do, don't ask Peter Molyneux, 'What now?', as if *Godus* is the next or final stage of that continuity. The years have been too many to reel off back-of-box claims of bigger, better, badder. Though there will be no box to write them on.

"NONE OF MY GAMES HAVE BEEN GREAT. THEY'VE BEEN INTERESTING, BUT THEY'VE NEVER BEEN GREAT… GREATNESS IS SOMETHING WHICH IS JUST DELIGHTFUL"

"It'll be [downloadable to] PC, Mac, Linux, iPhone, Android, probably consoles at some point. I don't care about the platform, I care more about how you interact with it." Not a game, then, but an experiment? Not exactly. *Curiosity* was the experiment, *Godus* is the result. "I had to do *Curiosity* to learn how to make *Godus*," Molyneux explains. "That's what it was all about, that's why it was *called* an experiment. I tried to be super-clear about that. You know, say, 'Sorry it's not a game, sorry that the only thing you can do is tap'.

"I wanted to find out if big motivations like what's inside the cube were enough to fuel people to do unimaginably huge things. In that sense, it kind of worked really well. It was just way, way more successful than I ever dreamed possible. My metric was this: I've got about 50,000 Twitter followers, Imagine every one of my followers [playing *Curiosity*]. I imagined 50,000 people. But that 50,000 was reached within three hours of the game launching. And that was a *big* problem; there were just too many people."

The rest is well-known history among those with at least one eye on gaming news. 22Cans' servers collapsed catastrophically beneath the weight of its many tappers. Connections dropped, people lost their progress, most couldn't log in at all. Molyneux »



Dungeon Keeper

Since every dungeon adventure title to date had put players in the shoes of the intrepid band of adventurers, Molyneux decided to put players in the shoes of the bad guy.



The Movies

What would it be like to build and run your own movie studio, make your own productions, deal with the petty issues of your prima donna actors? Molyneux realised this in the award-winning film studio sim *The Movies*.



A HISTORY OF WORKPLACES

BULLFROG 1987-1997

- Dungeon Keeper (1997)
- Genewars (1996)
- Hi-Octane (1995)
- Magic Carpet (1994)
- Theme Park (1994)
- Syndicate (1993)
- Populous II: Trials of the Olympian Gods (1991)
- Powermonger (1990)
- Populous (1989)
- Fusion (1987)

LIONHEAD STUDIOS 2001-2012

- Fable: The Journey (2012)
- Fable III (2010)
- Fable II (2008)
- Black & White 2: Battle of the Gods (2006)
- The Movies: Stunts & Effects (2006)
- Black & White 2 (2005)
- The Movies (2005)
- Fable: The Lost Chapters (2005)
- Fable (2004)
- Black & White (2001)

22CANS 2012 TO PRESENT

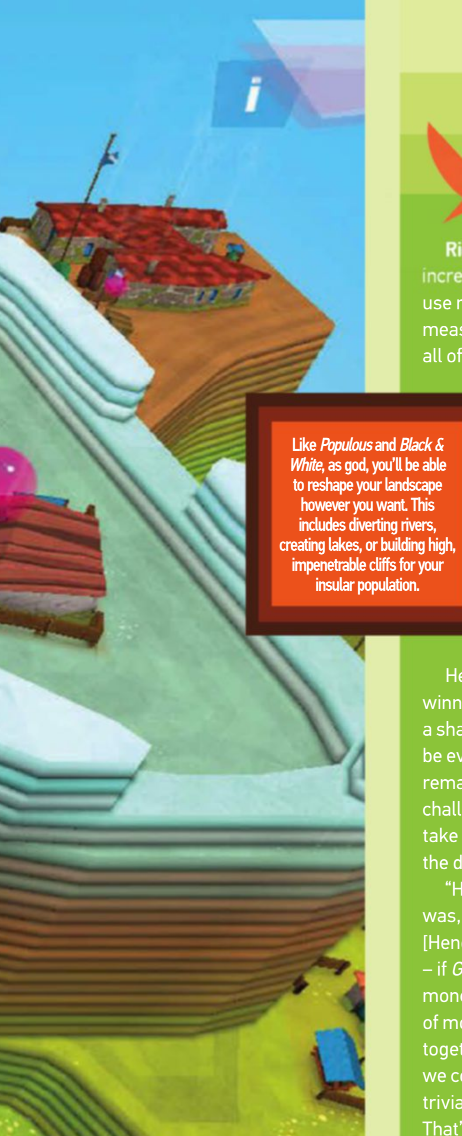
- Godus (2013)
- Curiosity (2012)

"I FEEL LIKE I'VE REMEMBERED WHO I AM, AND WHO I'M NOT. AND WHO I AM IS SOMEONE THAT GETS OBSESSIVE WITH DOING ONE THING"

» and his team made humble viral videos to show the mob a human face. Unexpected things started to happen. Curiosity's giant cube was worn away a layer at a time. "It seemed like you could just go like that [gestures all fingers waggling], and some people did, some people are artists and they felt like they wanted to draw things. Some people were communicators and they'd leave messages. Usually 'Fuck', or they'd draw penises. Some people were destroyers and they'd destroy things [drawn] on the cube. We looked at the way those people played, we looked at when they played and the time of day and how often. And that was incredibly useful when we come to design *Godus*."

Peter Molyneux has a clear notion of how one feeds into the other: *Curiosity* into *Godus*. How the latter is facilitated by the former. From anywhere outside of his head, however, it's a tough concept to grasp. It requires strands of psychology and mathematics, statistical analysis and the game-design expertise to spin them into a single, unbroken cord.

A living world. We've heard that term so often its cliché is farcical. *Godus*'s citizens do seem to get on with stuff of their own accord, and typically, there's real personality to the way the characters behave.



Like *Populous* and *Black & White*, as god, you'll be able to reshape your landscape however you want. This includes diverting rivers, creating lakes, or building high, impenetrable cliffs for your insular population.

Right now the only thing spinning is our heads. "*Godus* has incredibly simple gameplay," Molyneux reassures. "You can use multiple touch, it measures the velocity of your finger. It measures the speed at which you do things, and we learned all of that from *Curiosity*. Now, the other thing that *Curiosity* did was to test the technology, but the most contentious thing was the centre. And the centre is this: If I believe (and it's insane for me to believe this, but as a designer you have to think like this) I'm making something in *Godus* that millions of people will play, and those millions of people are all connected together, and those millions of people are all gods in a god game, if everyone's worlds are connected. Wouldn't it be amazing to have one human being who dictates morally what's right and wrong in all the worlds of all the gods?"

He's speaking of Brian Henderson, *Curiosity*'s ultimate winner. "Wouldn't it be even more amazing to give that person a share of the royalties from the game. And then, wouldn't it be even more amazing than that to say that this person's reign remains unchallenged for six months, and then someone can challenge them to take on the role of god of gods, and they'll take with them all the power and influence. All the worlds, all the devices and the ability to get royalties.

"How do we find one of these people? That's what *Curiosity* was, finding that first person. And then after that, after [Henderson's] reign has been there for six months, he could – if *Godus* is not very successful – end up with virtually no money. But if *Godus* is successful, he could end up with *a lot* of money. And then someone – a clan of people – can come together and challenge the God of gods to a battle. That battle we could put on Twitch TV and, you know, the prize isn't some trivial thing. The prize is to be god of gods in all the worlds. That's so cool."

If it's successful. It's difficult not to wonder what follows if those words are a true portent. Is the snake about to eat its own tail? If success knocks at 22Cans' door, a bigger house surely follows, its tenancy swelled by the need for bigger, and better. If Molyneux wins the Golden Ticket, what will he do among the temptation-strewn wonders of Wonka's triple-A game factory? "This is the thing: there's an overwhelming urge to solve problems by taking on more people. This is the third time I've done this. Every time, the biggest problems come once you start growing beyond a certain size. So I've said to people, 'Right, you know what? We're not hiring any more people.' We don't need more people. These are all the people we need to make the game. I said that, and then, within 24 hours, someone came to me and said, 'We just need one more person.' You *always* need to take on one more person. But I'm going to try as hard as I can to keep the core of the company together, because when you start to add a lot more people, you dilute the talent that's there. I'm going to try to resist that."

There's no private healthcare at 22Cans. There's no pool table, no foosball, no retro arcade machines with three-letter leaderboards in jaggy, vector-line fonts. There's just an office with some desks in it (and presumably some chairs). "But the energy and the passion are there," and that, Molyneux insists, is all you need. "One of the things that I'm trying to get right with 22Cans is it being a very flat organisation. It's actually best for you to talk to them. The management culture is that no one's got a boss. No one's going to turn around and say to you, you know, 'Be in at this time, work this hard, do this stuff.' There is a structure, we use scrum methodology, but no one's there as part of a hierarchy. We're trying to make it flat. This is an idea stolen from Valve. At Valve they say no one's your boss and that's exactly what we're trying to achieve at 22Cans. Some people love that culture. We've had a couple of people start and it just didn't fit; they wanted to be in an organisation that had a hierarchy. Some people fit into it and some people don't. Everybody at 22Cans is absolutely passionate and believes in what it is they do."

To Peter Molyneux, who always sounded like an energised creator during his days making *Fable*, it's all lead in the pencil, fuel to a fire that almost went out. "I feel like I've remembered who I am, and who I'm not. And who I am is someone that gets obsessive with doing one thing, hopefully at my best. It's when I'm doing one thing with one team, and not someone at Microsoft. For me, it's just wonderful to focus. To go to bed at night thinking about the game, wake up again in the morning still thinking about the game. I love that." Until, one would think, an email arrives to ask, "Why are you so full of shit?"

Not so. The freedom Molyneux has, the contrast between the now and the before, his journey to the Spire and back again has changed him. He is free. Free, "to look at Aaron Bailey and say, 'You're going to send me an email in a year's time saying, "I thought you were full of shit, but after playing *Godus*, I think you're not".'

"Write that in your magazine and I'm going to get an avalanche of, 'You're so full of shit' emails." And he laughs because he can.



***Godus* will be released later in 2013.**

Living world


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OUYA

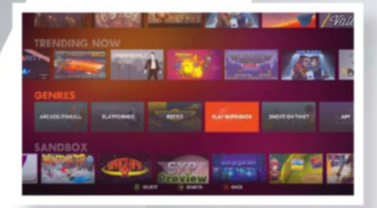
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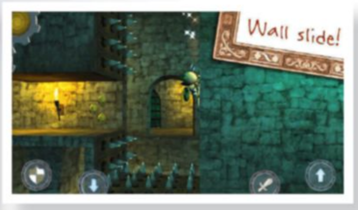
THE VERDICT

When Ouya was first announced in 2012 it promised exciting new times for an industry that many felt was stagnating. The exciting $99 console is now with us, so we put it through its paces to find out if Ouya is as revolutionary as it has been claiming…

It was just over a year ago when Ouya was launched on Kickstarter. It promised something so spectacular, so revolutionary that it exceeded its Kickstarter goal in record time. An impressive achievement to be sure, but one made even more amazing when you consider that its developers were asking for just under $1 million to fund their ambitious project. Unlike other Kickstarter projects Ouya didn't rely on amusing videos, or preyed on the nostalgia of gamers to achieve its goals – it simply delivered a great idea and backed it up with an intriguing prototype and stone cold facts. The premise was intriguing and eight hours after Ouya Inc's video had first been posted on Kickstarter, it sailed past its target, becoming the fasted Kickstarter project to ever break that fabled $1 million barrier. Some suggested that the console was too good to be true, while others went one further, proclaiming it to be nothing more than a sham that would never appear, but as the months passed, it became more and more obvious that Ouya was picking up more and more momentum and it seemed like not a day went by without some developer pledging allegiance to the new console. Square, Namco Bandai and Sega are just a few of the big name triple-A publishers to support the machine, while a host of indie darlings have announced or released games for it.

So here we are a year on and Ouya is finally a reality. And the thing we're most taken by, is not its vast library »





of games or its untapped potential as a gaming device, but just how small the damned thing actually is. Of course many of you will have seen videos and know what to expect, but it still feels incredibly weird to be able to hold a console in the palm of your hand. NEC's PC Engine may still hold the title for most aesthetically pleasing miniature home console, but the Ouya certainly comes a close second, with a sleek brushed metal finish that looks extremely stylish. While the console is light to hold there's a fair amount of power packed within its three-inch cube exterior, with



Square's *Final Fantasy III* is ressive port, but it's very expensive and is able on many other systems.

shoulder buttons feel decent to the touch, but the main triggers are surprisingly spongy. There's a touchpad as well, but it's slow and makes navigating using the browser a real pain. Syncing is also annoying and we'd occasionally have to resync the pad after using other Bluetooth controllers. It's also impossible to turn your Ouya on via the pad. The biggest issue with the Ouya's pad however is its poor response times. We've lost count of the times games suddenly stopped working or became sluggish to control due to controller lag and while it's rectified by sitting closer to Ouya, it's not an ideal solution. Luckily, wireless PS3 pads and wired Xbox pads give far more satisfying results, but it's a pity the host pad is so woefully average, as it's actually comfortable to hold.

Something that makes us less comfortable is the fact that you can't even use your Ouya unless you input your credit card details upon booting the machine. Choose not to enter this valuable information and your Ouya journey goes no further. It's a shocking, unexpected thing to be presented with, particularly when Ouya goes to great pains to allow you to download and try every game for free, and will no doubt put many consumers off. We had no luck

> "One of the best aspects of the Ouya is the sheer amount of games that are currently available for it"

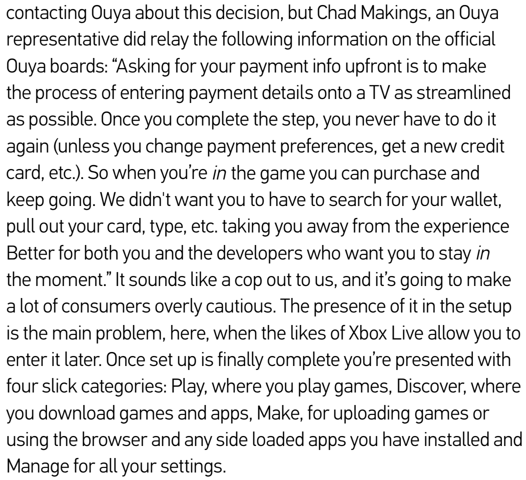
Ouya boasting a NVIDIA Tegra 3 processor, 1GB of RAM and 8GB of internal storage space (although roughly 2.5 of this is used for its operating system). It can handle a 1080P resolution via its HDMI port and features an Ethernet port, a Micro USB and a USB 2.0. It also runs a modified version of Android 4.1, so it packs a surprising punch, at least on paper…

The Ouya looks impressive, but its overall cheapness becomes more apparent once you use its controller. In short, it feels cheap and clunky, like many third-party controllers tend to be. While it's reassuringly weighty (thanks to batteries being evenly distributed on either side of the pad) there are plenty of other issues that remind you of the Ouya's affordable price tag. The first is the batteries themselves. Because the Ouya comes with the bare minimum of instructions, it's not made clear that you must lift up the faceplates found on either side of the pad to insert the batteries. Even once you've done that the four main face buttons often stick. The face and

The Ouya lacks great exclusives. There are plenty of fantastic games like *Super Crate Box*, but they're easily available elsewhere.



There are, however, many different genres to be found on the Ouya.



contacting Ouya about this decision, but Chad Makings, an Ouya representative did relay the following information on the official Ouya boards: "Asking for your payment info upfront is to make the process of entering payment details onto a TV as streamlined as possible. Once you complete the step, you never have to do it again (unless you change payment preferences, get a new credit card, etc.). So when you're *in* the game you can purchase and keep going. We didn't want you to have to search for your wallet, pull out your card, type, etc. taking you away from the experience Better for both you and the developers who want you to stay *in* the moment." It sounds like a cop out to us, and it's going to make a lot of consumers overly cautious. The presence of it in the setup is the main problem, here, when the likes of Xbox Live allow you to enter it later. Once set up is finally complete you're presented with four slick categories: Play, where you play games, Discover, where you download games and apps, Make, for uploading games or using the browser and any side loaded apps you have installed and Manage for all your settings.

One of the best aspects of the Ouya, even at this early stage is the sheer amount of games that are currently available for it. As we went to press there were 243 different games and applications available, an impressive amount for any system, yet alone one that's barely a few weeks old. Virtually every kind of genre is represented and if you like playing a certain type of game, odds are there will be an Ouya title to cater to your needs, be it a racing, puzzle game or endless runner. Unfortunately, while there are plenty of games to choose from, finding them is arduous due to a lack of decent search functions. Upon entering Discover you find categories which are stuffed full of games. In addition to being slow





DEVELOPER THOUGHTS

HENRIGUE OLIFIERS

Founder and CEO Boassa Studios



OUYA GAME: DEEP DUNGEONS OF DOOM

How are you finding working on the Ouya?

In terms of technology, it is pretty much just like other Android devices we support. That is to say, it requires almost no Ouya-specific code. In terms of actually shipping games, Ouya's system is young but well structured. It's pretty easy to create updates and submit them, manage purchases, things like that. It might sound mundane, but many storefronts get this part all wrong, and make shipping a pain. Ouya has made it pretty easy to launch a product on their platform. I assume that the DISCOVER screen is a work in progress, and there are some neat ideas there, but it seems like it hasn't really found its footing yet.

What do you think needs to be done to improve its commercial appeal?

Basically I see three areas: The first is marketing; so much of success is just about consumer awareness. The second is game discovery. As I mentioned before, I think the DISCOVER tab can be improved. Right now it gives the (false) impression that there are very few games available, as many games appear prominently positioned in multiple lists. And the third is retail penetration. Ouya has actually done a great job of getting their devices into retail outlets around the country, but they need to continue to do that, and expand the areas where it is available.

"Its biggest strength is its simplicity and openness"

ERIC FROEMLING

Creator, Bombsquad



OUYA GAME: BOMBSQUAD

What support has the Ouya team given you while making Bombsquad?

They've been very supportive in many ways such as offering to hook me up with test hardware, etc. At one point after I brought up issues with their early controllers one of their engineers went out of his way to drive past my apartment in San Francisco and drop off some controllers with new test firmware for me to try out.

What are Ouya's strengths and weaknesses?

I think its biggest strength is its simplicity and openness. I like the fact that it's so easy to grab a friend and dive into simple games like *Get On Top* or *No Brakes Valet*. I think its biggest weakness right now is its relatively weak hardware, though I think that's not a problem as long as games work with the limitations (by rendering at 720p instead of 1080p when it makes sense, etc).

What do you think needs to be done to improve Ouya's commercial appeal?

I think the two big things are getting more good games out there and smoothing over some of the hardware/software bumps. It seems like Ouya is trying to address the first with things like their new Kickstarter matching program, and hopefully they'll be stubbornly persistent about addressing the second too. If they can clear up the wireless issues, get their UIs silky smooth, and get their controller feeling top notch I think they'll be in a good place.

CHRISS PRUETT

Co-founder, CEO, robot invader



OUYA GAME: WIND-UP KNIGHT

What's Ouya like to work on?

It's a really neat machine, as straightforward as it gets. If you're working with Unity, it's as simple as exporting for Android. The biggest advantage of the platform is the open publishing model. You can have your game up and running in the store minutes after you upload it, that's a very different scenario from traditional consoles. It's perfect for indies to test their games before considering going bigger.

What are its main strengths and weaknesses?

While the easiness to publish on the platform is its strength, discoverability will quickly become a problem. The Ouya is using a dashboard system similar to Live Arcade, which is terrible in this day and age. It has to evolve to something customised for you, based on other games you play, what your friends enjoy. As more games get into the platform, this will have to evolve fast or it will kill it.

Do things like the input lag frustrate as a developer?

I think this is one of those things that were born out of bringing to market a product with breakneck speed the Ouya went through. It sounds to me like a bug that could and should be patched shortly: if the Ouya gamepad works lag-free with a PC, and a PC gamepad works lag-free with the Ouya, it's very likely to be a software bug that could be fixed. I'm keeping my fingers crossed. It's now down to the Ouya team to tweak, improve and build upon all its aspects.

JAMIE WOODHOUSE

Founder, mr qwak



OUYA GAME: RETRO RACING

How are you finding coding on Ouya?

Very enjoyable. Essentially, you just treat it like any other Android device; the development environment is the same (Java and the Android NDK if you're using C++). You just need to make sure that you can navigate around your game UI using joypads, and that it works with the Ouya in-app purchase API (all games need to be free to download and try, so you need in app purchase to monetize your game).

What consumers do you think the Ouya will most appeal to?

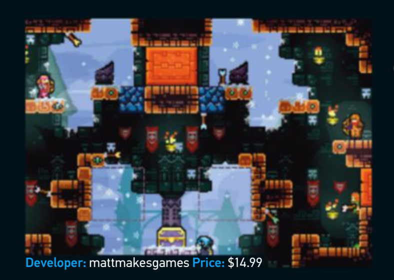
I think it's well suited to couch gaming with friends, and multiplayer games seem very popular (I am getting multiple requests for four-player *Retro Racing*). I guess it would appeal to people who like to play indie games that aren't super polished and refined (some of which are really quite playable and fun in multiplayer). Also, it's a cheaper option than more established consoles (both the console itself, and that games, are cheaper).

Do you think the jerkiness of several games is poor optimisation, or that the machine is underpowered?

I guess that kind of thing is down to the developer. I think the hardware is capable enough, it runs *Retro Racing* at a solid 60 frames per second, and some of the other (2D) games I've looked at are plenty smooth enough. Maybe it helps if a game is coded in C++ and using OpenGL, rather than Java and Canvas for graphics. For me, I get the impression that the hardware is up to the job.

TRENDSETTERS

The Ouya games you really need to play


Developer: mattmakesgames Price: $14.99

TOWERFALL

IF THERE'S one game that all Ouya developers are trying to beat it's this sterling effort by Matt Thorson. *Towerfall* works because it plays to all the Ouya's strengths. It also happens to be a superb multiplayer game, full of riotous, fast-paced action. Up to four players are dropped into an arena and must take each other out with well-timed arrows (or a simple head stomp). Easily worth the high cost.

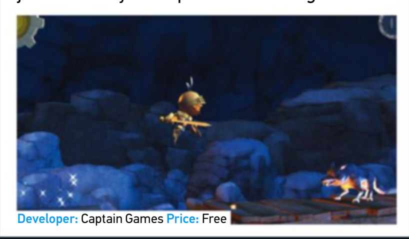
NO BREAKS VALET

GET PAST the incredibly crude visuals and you'll discover *No Breaks Valet* to be tremendously silly fun. You're presented with an empty car park and cars get randomly belched out from one of two lanes. You must then try and guide them to a suitable parking space and line them up as neatly as possible. Needless to say it becomes more and more hectic as the car park begins to fill up.


Developer: Captain Games Price: Free

WIND-UP KNIGHT

ROBOT INVADER'S smash hit reaches Ouya and it works amazingly well on a big screen. It's a variant on the endless runner, where you continually pick up keys to keep your knight constantly wound up. As you navigate each devilishly created course you'll stab, jump and roll your way to victory. Graphically it looks superb too, with impressive visuals that prove just what Ouya is capable of in the right hands.


Developer: Captain Games Price: Free

BOMBSQUAD

Developer: Eric Froemling Price: $4.95

MULTIPLAYER GAMING is one of the Ouya's biggest strengths, and it's put to exceptional use in the brilliant *Bombsquad*. It's possible to connect up a variety of devices, ranging from android and iOS devices to 360 controllers, ensuring multiplayer skirmishes of up to eight players. The maps are often nice and tight, allowing for crowded, down-to-the-wire face-offs, while a variety of gameplay modes keep the action fresh and exciting. While its fine with AI opponents, it really comes into its own with human adversaries.

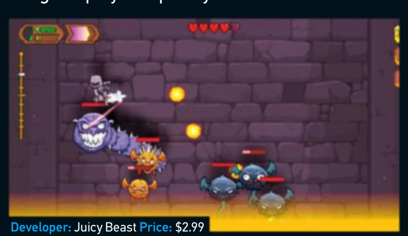
MONOCLE MAN

Developer: Summer Door Games/ Cogswell Game Development Club Price: Free

CHARMING PUZZLE platformer where you must escape an hourglass and climb out of an ever-increasing pile of sand. Use springs, blocks and other objects to reach the top of an hourglass as quickly as possible so that you can be catapulted to the next level. Stages start off relatively simple, but become quite complex in their design, requiring plenty of head scratching and quick reflexes to avoid dying.

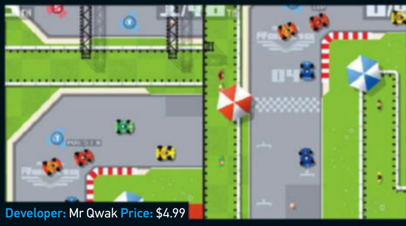
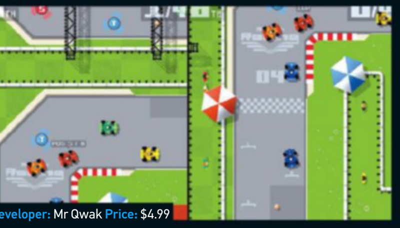
KNIGHTMARE TOWER

IN THIS charming *Doodle Jump* variant you launch a Knight upwards on a giant rocket in search of Princesses. You stay afloat in the air by slashing at enemies below you, which raises your combo and hurls you higher. While the careful balance between finding power-ups during play and the items you can buy are impressive, it's the sheer addictive nature of the gameplay that pulls you back.


Developer: Juicy Beast Price: $2.99

RETRO RACING

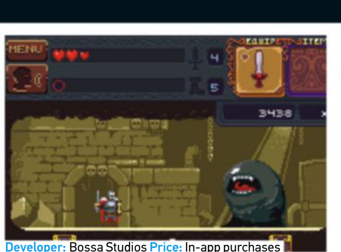
JAMIE WOODHOUSE is no stranger to top-down racers, having created the brilliant Amiga games *Nitro* and *ATR: All Terrain Racing*. *Retro Racer* feels like a spiritual successor to these classics, delivering extremely tight controls, craftily designed tracks to race around and a selection of power-ups that slowly tune up your vehicle. A highly satisfying racer.



Developer: Mr Qwak Price: $4.99

POLARITY

Developer: Bluebutton Games Price: $4.99

ANOTHER OUYA exclusive and another that highlights the potential of the console. *Polarity* is effectively a budget version of *Portal*, but don't let that put you off. While it can't compete with Valve's budget, and lacks the diversity of the portal gun, it's nevertheless filled with plenty of clever puzzles that typically resolve around switching your polarity to allow you to interact with your clinical environment. *Polarity* is an excellent 3D game that effortlessly combines platforming with hardcore puzzles and as a result comes highly recommended.


Developer: Bossa Studios Price: In-app purchases

DEEP DUNGEONS OF DOOM

EXCELLENT ROGUELIKE where you hack and slash your way through increasingly dangerous dungeons. While your character is only able to block, attack or use items to defend, the combat system is surprisingly flexible due to each enemy having its own unique attacks. With three classes to choose from, a wealth of upgrades to unlock and masses of useful magical items to use, Bossa Studios' game becomes hard to put down.


Developer: Hexage Price: $1.99

EVAC

IMAGINE *PAC-MAN* crossed with *Metal Gear Solid* and soaked in a palette of neon hues and you have a good idea of what to expect from this entertaining maze game. In addition to collecting pellets and avoiding enemies, you can trap your foes, move boxes to open up new areas of a maze and even hide stealth-like in concealed areas. It's a great take on an age-old game concept and is further fuelled by superb music and an intriguing story.



Some 3D titles really struggle when a lot is happening onscreen.



While it's possible to stream PC games on Ouya via Kainy, lag input is quite noticeable.



Emulation Nation

One aspect where Ouya does succeed is in its emulation, which is already coming along in leaps and bounds. It's clearly a grey area of the device due to the legality of ROMS, but there's no denying that the current emulators available are of a high standard, offering all sorts of useful tricks and filters and often being very well optimised, although later systems like the N64 and PlayStation were far from perfect. The available emulators are mainly ports of previous Android offerings and cover the gamut of systems, from 8-bit computers like the Commodore 64, to later consoles like Nintendo's DS. While many of the emus have web pages that link to legitimate homebrew games, this is easily bypassed by those that know what they're doing. Of course, the use of emulators isn't illegal, but the use of ROMS and any required BIOS are, so it's going to be interesting to see if Nintendo, Sega, Sony or any of the other companies with games that can be emulated on Ouya will move to have the apps taken down.



to update, most categories are filled with the same titles, as sometimes happens with Netflix.

Initially, finished games are dumped in an area called Sandbox when they are first uploaded and voting gets them out to their relevant categories, it's a nice touch, maintaining the community spirit Ouya is striving for, but it's no doubt frustrating for those developers stuck in this digital no man's land. One of the biggest problems with Google Play and the App Store is having developers get their games noticed, and so far, the Ouya has exactly the same problem. It also has an issue with 3D games. While the likes of *Shadowgun* and *Final Fantasy III* are impressive, the likes of *Ravensword: Shadowlands*, *The Ball* and *ChronoBlade* stutter quite badly and can be off-putting to play. We can't tell if it's down to poor optimisation or bad coding, but considering how well some 3D titles run we think it could be the former. While there are a lot of throwaway games to be found, there are also plenty of gems, and simply digging around the store is highly satisfying. It's simply nice to turn on a console and have that level of culture prebuilt into the unit; whether it yields anything over a long period of time remains to be seen, but right now, there's at least a foundation for the kind of indie utopia that Ouya so obviously wants to generate. It's a bit of a wait-and-see-situation at the moment.

> "It should be considered a beta project, released a little too early"

Aside from its diverse games, the most interesting aspect of Ouya is also its most controversial – namely its open nature that allows you to do many things that simply won't be possible on current consoles. Emulation, and side loading apps are the biggest draw, but side loading is still definitely a work in process. It's worth noting as well that many games and apps simply aren't optimised for Ouya, meaning some titles work barely, or not at all, making it something of a crapshoot. Of course the sheer hackable nature of the device means that this won't matter to some, as experimentation is all part of the process, but the average gamer will most likely find the openness of the Ouya too much of a hurdle to navigate. At least the option is there for the more adventurous and it's again a neat aspect that keeps our interest in the Ouya from totally souring, especially once you start experimenting with streaming devices like Plex and Kainy that allow you to stream (although the results vary drastically) movies, music and even PC games like *Skyrim* through the tiny system. Ouya in its current state is a bizarre curio and an oddity, but it's one that just about holds our interest.

THE EMULATORS AVAILABLE AND THE SYSTEMS THEY EMULATE

- 2600.emu/Atari 2600
- C64.emu/Commodore 64
- Emuya/NES
- FPse for OUYA/PlayStation
- GBA.emu/Game Boy Advance
- GBC.emu/Game Boy Color
- MD.emu/Mega Drive
- MSX.emu/MSX
- nds4droid/Nintendo DS
- NEO.emu/Neo Geo AES
- NES.emu/NES
- NGP.emu/Neo Geo Pocket Color
- PCE.emu/PC Engine
- SNES9x EX Plus/Super Nintendo
- SuperGNES/Super Nintendo

FINAL VERDICT

A year ago there was a sense that Ouya would be something different, something that would genuinely revolutionise the games industry. While we have no doubt that the Ouya is the first step to something better, something that will benefit all gamers, there's no denying that it's a very flawed device in its current state and it still feels like a beta product.

The beauty of a system like Ouya means that it will be able to adapt and evolve, Galapagos Finch-like, in order to meet the needs of its customers and users as new online updates and hardware revisions are rolled out, but the real question is whether the mass market will take to it as easily as developers have. In many ways we see the Ouya as a solid companion to the current range of consoles, as it's filling a niche that its peers don't manage and it fills it well (for the most part). While there are plenty of indie style games on both the PS3 and Xbox 360 (particularly the latter) the grass roots approach of Ouya and the sheer variety and diversity of its games make them feel like a more natural fit. There's a late Eighties/Nineties vibe to the Ouya that the other consoles simply don't possess. Nowadays we're taught that gaming with faceless individuals is the way forward, but Ouya takes us back to a simpler time when you could play together with friends and jostle and heckle each other as you competed to become the best player.

Personally we're disappointed with Ouya, as it's getting so many fundamental things wrong, but we can see the potential of its apps and the ability to use emulators and side load, which gives it access to a whole host of programs that we could never see appearing on corporate consoles. It should be considered a beta product, something that's been released a little too early and will evolve along with its market. If that sounds enticing then welcome aboard. Everyone else should consider waiting for incoming devices like GameStick and Shield before finally parting with their money.





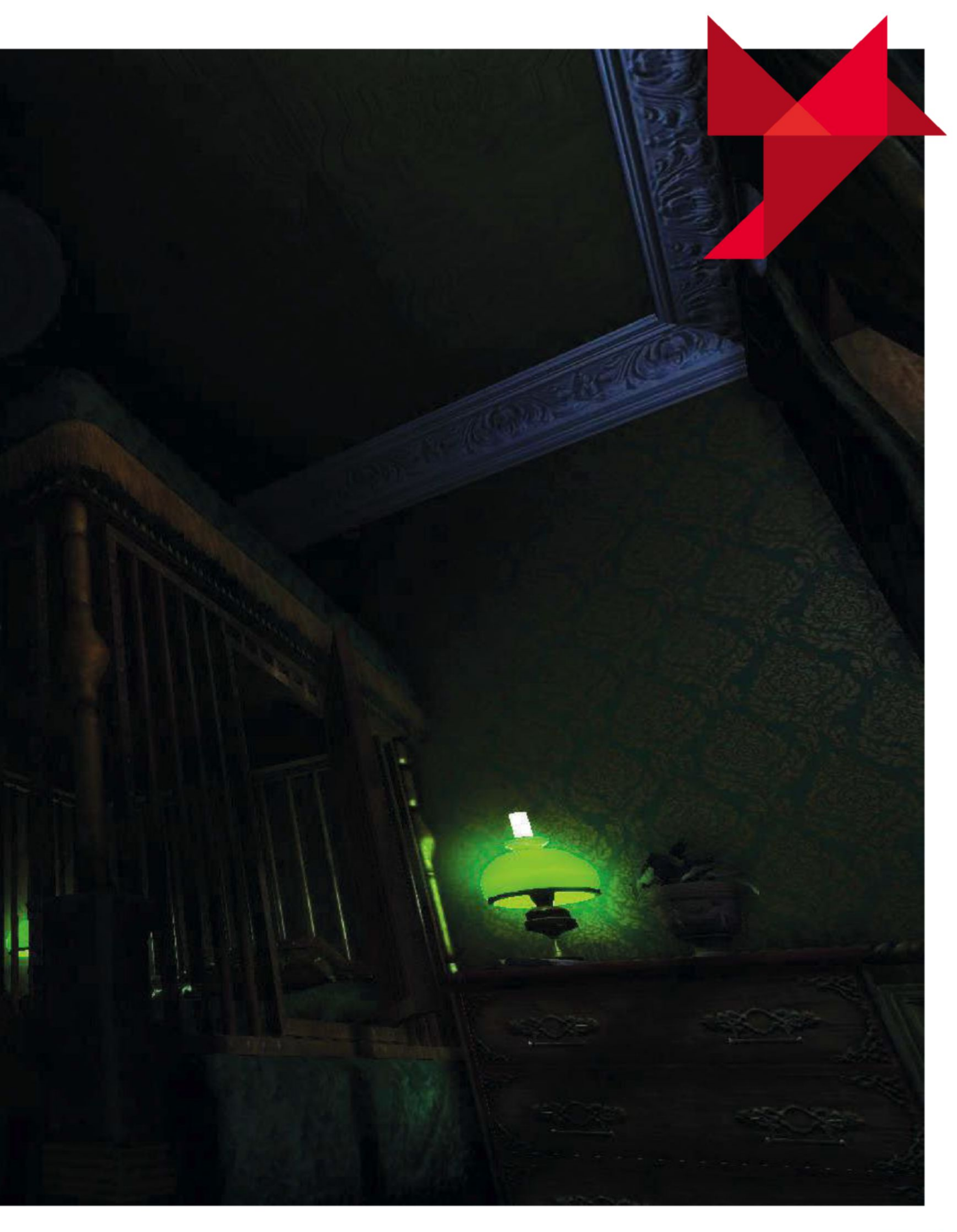
SOUND & VISION:

Inside The Chinese Room

games™ joins Dear Esther developer The Chinese Room for a candid discussion about collaboration, the studio's trajectory and the nature of meaningful interaction

BETWEEN THE AMORPHOUS PLOTTING AND HAUNTING MILIEU OF DEAR ESTHER, THE *HALF-LIFE*-MOD-CUM-INDIE DARLING HAD A SHARP POINT: FORGET ANY PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS ABOUT WHAT DEFINES A VIDEOGAME. The Chinese Room's project was at the vanguard of an indie movement, looking to cast off the shackles of mechanics and hackneyed tropes, using richly nuanced storytelling and emotive musical score to convey its themes. It's a sophisticated, ambitious approach to storytelling that was lauded for its refusal to condescend and audience that has grown to expect just that.

It's this keen understanding of the medium that continues to compel husband and wife co-founders Dan Pinchback and Jessica Curry's writing and music respectively. **games™** joins the two of them in the offices of UKIE where they've gathered together other members of The Chinese Room – each of the team work remotely, using Skype to communicate daily to discuss its upcoming projects – the impending release of







Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs (the sequel to Frictional Games' horror hit) and the mystery next-gen project the studio can only allude to today. However, what they *can* discuss is fascinating, reflecting in their own words on issues regarding publisher perceptions, the future of the indie scene and how staying small is key to aiming big.

HOW THE STUDIO CAME TOGETHER...

DAN PINCHBACK (*creative director*): I want to make it clear that it's Jess and I that are married [laughs]. Since we got married, Jess and I have worked together on a few art projects and different interactive digital stuff. Naturally we fell into games. I was doing a PhD on first-person shooters and I was frustrated with the fact that there was a lot of theoretical academia floating around about what games could do and what they couldn't do, what is and isn't a game. I was really interested in story and there was a lot of talk at that point that story was secondary and it's all about mechanics. So we thought we'd test that – take all the mechanics out and see if story is enough. Jess did the music for *Dear Esther*, I designed and wrote it and we released it as a mod, which did well. We were moving on to do other things and then Rob Briscoe, who was at DICE, contacted us and asked to basically, at that point, reskin the mod. And he started working on it and it grew and grew and grew.

BRADY JONES (*environment artist*): I was following what Rob was doing while I was at uni and it was a huge influence for my final major project. I loved it visually. What attracted me to the company was that it's not really pandering to a demographic. It's playing to an idea, expressing an idea rather than tailor making something to make money out of it.

ANDREW CRAWSHAW (*lead designer*): I tried doing the lone indie thing and I needed to find a new job, and my former employer actually pointed out the job opportunity. I managed to download a pre-release of *Dear Esther* and that convinced me that I wanted to work on whatever they were doing next. What's key to me about the game is that there's space in there. Many games, especially triple-A try to cram as much stuff in, drag a player through the game rather than them following it through. I don't think I would ever go work for a traditional games company again. Dan and Jess don't have those awful habits that other studios have where it's all about how you maximise profits and things like that. What I really like about working with these two is that they put a grasp on value rather than cost, whereas other places will just look at the bottom line.

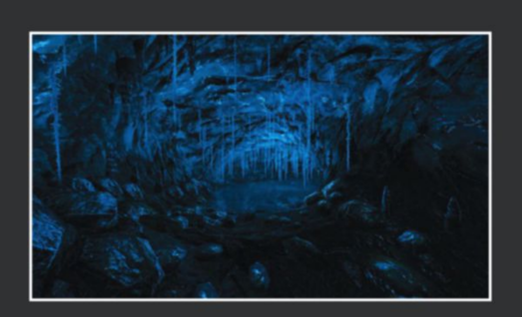
SINDRE GRØNVOLL (*lead artist*): I'd agree with that. Prior to this I worked in really large studios and being able to work for a couple like this is really rewarding. It has all that creative freedom you don't tend to get at big companies where profit is such an important element.

> "[Microsoft] mistreated the people making the products and if you do that people will stop making games for you" Dan Pinchbeck, Creative Director

KEEPING THE CHINESE ROOM SMALL SCALE...

JESSICA CURRY (*co-director and composer*): A lot of people have said 'Why aren't you pushing the company for maximum growth really quickly?' And one guy said that it's really irresponsible that we're not doing loads of work for hire, that we're putting all our eggs in one basket and leaving our staff very vulnerable. It was seen as quite an unpopular stance that we don't want to grow as quickly as possible just for the sake of it. That's really interesting to me, not coming from the games industry.

DAN: [*Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs*] was kind of work for hire. We got talking to Frictional – who I've known for a few years being a big fan of *Penumbra* – and they said 'We really want to make another *Amnesia* game but we can't for a couple of years. We were thinking of outsourcing it to another studio – are you interested?' It was pre-*Esther*, so we ended up running three games simultaneously: We had *Esther* coming up to launch, we had a team working on the *Amnesia* sequel and Andrew joined us then doing the prototype at the university [for the untitled 2015 project]. It was really chaotic and complicated. But the deal on *Amnesia* was that we would produce something that would fit to the *Amnesia* model, but apart from that we had a pretty open brief.



Dear Esther

The studio's first project began life as a *Half-Life* mod and was later adapted commercially by DICE's Rob Briscoe and released in 2012. Thought provoking and highly evocative, *Dear Esther* is much the same as thatgamecompany's *Journey* in so much as it subverts traditional mechanics and drives the player through its intense, emotional setting with a richly involving story and an unrivalled sense of discovery. It's a testament to the poignant writing that the impact of the story is felt long after you've reached its climax.



■ *THE CHINESE ROOM WAS GIVEN CREATIVE FREEDOM WITH THE SEQUEL TO FRICTIONAL GAMES'* AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT.

JESSICA: It was something that I passionately wanted to make and it wasn't a financial decision.

DAN: It was an opportunity to make a game and it fitted with what we wanted to say as a studio. A lot of the back references to the *Amnesia* mythos and things like that, when we started putting that stuff in, Frictional were like 'Oh, you're going to tie it back into the original?' There was quite a substantial amount of creative freedom and it was very easy to have a sense of ownership working on it.

JESSICA: It seemed like a really good way of not making another *Dear Esther* as well; we felt like we've really said all we wanted to say with that.

THE STUDIO'S WORKING RELATIONSHIP...

JESSICA: The music I wrote for the penultimate two levels of *Pigs* came directly from Sindre's visuals. I was so inspired. It was so lovely to get that... you riff off each other and that's exciting to me. I couldn't have sat down and just written that music. I can write this because I'd read Dan's work...

SINDRE: Exactly. Those levels came from the atmosphere that I felt from reading Dan's writing. Which is something that I've found is quite rare to experience, something that's really inspiring.

DAN: In my head, when I first started writing it, they were exterior levels on a level field with aerials coming out. The great thing about conceptual writing is that you don't say 'This is a room, it's this big' you write 'This is the feeling I want, this is the emotion I want.' To hand that across to someone else and to come back with something completely different, that nails where you were going in terms of player experience but has a completely different conceptualisation of how to get that, is so exciting.

SINDRE: One of the contrasts you have in a company like this versus a big company you tend to have the artists in one group, programmers in one group, designers in on group – it's really segmented. In this you deal so directly with everyone so you get impulses from other disciplines you wouldn't normally get and I find that super inspiring.

ANDREW: That's despite us all being in different cities, we're actually closer as a studio.

ON WORKING WITH FRICTIONAL GAMES ON AMNESIA: A MACHINE FOR PIGS...

DAN: It happened naturally, really. Originally it was meant to be just like the *Justine* DLC they did. We started working on it and I got really carried away, started generating hundreds of maps. We took that back and Frictional showed them kind of art builds we were getting and the story we wanted to tell and said 'There's no way we can do this in the initial time frame; we can tell that story or [enthusiastic voice] we can do *this*!' Which is now why it's delayed.

JESSICA: The first tweet I ever read after the announcement was 'If you fuck this up I'll slit yours and your family's throats.'

DAN: And that was from Jens [Nilsson – Frictional Games co-founder] [Laughs]. We've never worked with a publisher. It was the weird halfway thing where you

Meet The Chinese Room...



Dan Pinchback: *Creative director*



Jessica Curry: *Co-director and composer*



Andrew Crawshaw: *Lead designer*



Brady Jones: *Environment artist*



Stuart Yarham: *Lead Programmer*



Sindre Grønvoll: *Lead artist*



kind of understand the publisher relationship and then the other half is this terror. I'm terrified still, I mean, this is *Amnesia* – these shoes are really big, it's their baby. It's not THQ saying 'This is our franchise, go make us some money.' This is creatively their baby and they've put a huge amount of trust in us.

JESSICA: We had no expectation with *Esther* – that was the wonderful thing about it. We didn't even think anyone would buy it.

DAN: 20,000 was our target. Looking back, that was ambitious for an experimental indie game. Only now are we starting to realise just how phenomenally well *Esther* sold. Over 100,000 – that's just a stupid amount of units for an indie.

JESSICA: You came from the live arts where four people who would turn out for your experimental jazz workshop and you'd be really pleased.

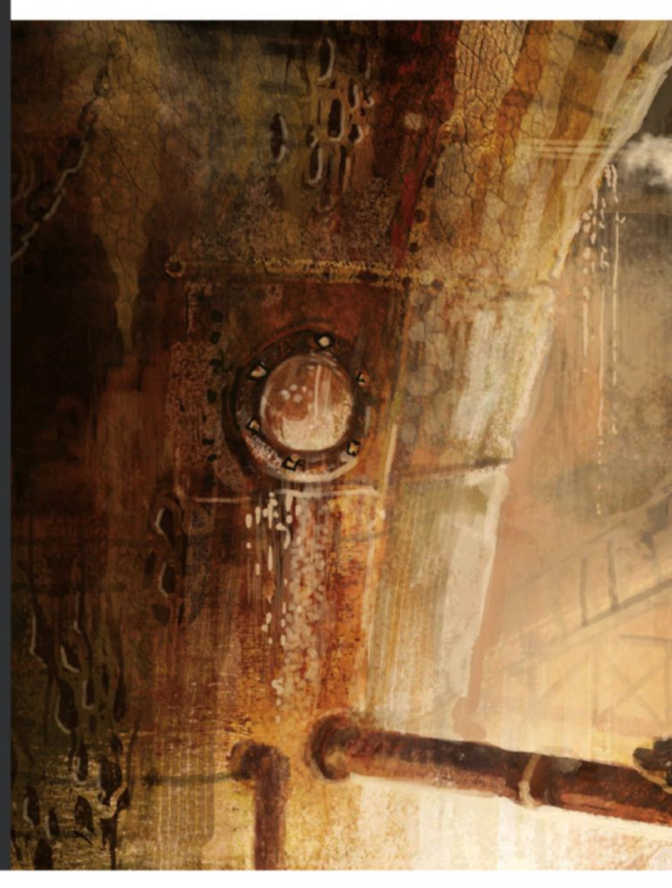
DAN: The only people in the room watching the live art are the artist and the six other performers doing events that night. And maybe a tramp that has passed out in the corner. We're still constantly surprised by [*Dear Esther*].

ON DEMOGRAPHICS…

JESSICA: I still get about five emails every day about the music and that's why you do it. People write off a segment of the audience as stupid, aggressive; that they're young, teenage boys with no capacity for intellectual thought. And then you get these emails every day from these young lads that just say that this incredibly delicate chamber music touched them very deeply. I think that's extraordinary and just shows how much we underestimate people everyday when we make games.

AMNESIA: A MACHINE FOR PIGS

Working on a sequel to Frictional Games' haunting *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, The Chinese Room has completed work on it, which is now being polished by Frictional. It's an indirect sequel, set in 1899 Victorian London, however it does link the core mythos of the universe. The reason for the delay is the expanded concept for the sequel, which was originally planned as a DLC-sized chunk. The game is now set for release at the end of summer.



> "I think Super Hexagon and Dear Esther are really close. They're both about how much you can take away while still being a game by the end of it" Andrew Crawshaw, Lead Designer

That heartened me on a social level as well as on a gaming level.

DAN: We didn't assume they wouldn't get it. That's true of the best games, they don't talk down to you.

JESSICA: You don't have to understand everything necessarily to get the broad pleasure of the experience. There might be a reference you don't get, a visual – it doesn't actually matter as long as you're communicating the broad experience. Dumbing down continues to infuriate me.

BRADY: I talk a lot about *Dark Souls* in that regard. I'm obsessed about it.

DAN: I nearly threw the Xbox out the window when I tried to play *Fable 3*. I really like the *Fable* series, but I was there going 'I've been playing this for an hour and a half, stop with the fucking tutorial, please let me play the game.' I can't stand games that won't let you play them because they're so busy treating you like a total idiot. They don't trust you to just play the game. I'm 40 years old, I've been playing games for 33 years – I don't need to be told how to play this anymore. It's so weird, because every developer has says this in interviews and has done for the last five years – how is this still a problem? I think games like *Journey* blow it out of the water and that's why they are so important. They speak in a few languages at once and one of which being is that it's financially viable to take that risk.

STUART YARHAM (*lead programmer*): I was looking forward to [*Journey*] since the very first image was released. As soon as I saw that I wanted to explore that world. The visuals really drew me in.

ON NEXT-GEN CONSOLES AND INDIE GAMES…

DAN: I find it still surprising how badly things can be handled. I've never known such a difference in a console launch in terms of how polarised the PR success has been. It's extraordinary.

JESSICA: I felt really uncomfortable with the reaction on Twitter. I really didn't like anyone on that day. It felt like bullying in the end, like being kids. What Twitter is really bad at is becoming this mob – I absolutely loathe it.

ANDREW: Maybe it was a mob but they deserved it. A generation ago indie developers would've been in a certain place in the food chain in terms of consoles – their voice is being heard now.

DAN: Like a lot of small studios, it set the agenda of where we were going to go if we were going to make choices. At this point, if we were choosing between consoles, it would be extremely hard for us not to go to PS4 and that's something that Microsoft have to listen to. The way they treated indies on XBLA wasn't good and the reputation got around and indies stopped working for them. It's one of the reasons why the XBLA







The studio's untitled 2015 project is next-gen, a job listing confirms.



isn't as powerful as the PSN Store because it hasn't got the products. They mistreated the people making the products and if you do that people will stop making games for you. And that's good, that's the democratisation of how the game making system works and Sony has been smart and listened to that.

THE THEMES THAT INTEREST THE CHINESE ROOM...

JESSICA: It sounds incredibly pretentious but it's what it is to be human. For me, all my music over the years has been about telling peoples stories, driven by human experience.

DAN: It's that emotional space. It's about creating things that are immersive, atmospheric, emotionally driven. Jess' music I had heard before we met, it's purely emotional and it's something that passes the head and punches straight to the heart. We often compare games to cinema but I think music is a much more interesting comparison, in terms of that being about a pure experience. As a writer, you're not always 100 per cent in control of the story. It's like a moth bumping up against a lightbulb in your head that eventually forms something. With *Pigs*, I was really quite politically fired-up; angry about the way the government was behaving. That's what came out of the core of *Pigs*, this idea of we seem to be in this space of neo-Victorian age again where the rich few treat the rest of the human race like product, this cattle. I was sitting there saying 'They're treating us like fucking pigs.' Bang! The game came out from that.

JESSICA: It's about unfolding layers... what's beneath the surface.



EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

Everybody's Gone To The Rapture is the spiritual sequel to *Dear Esther*, allowing more interactive elements than the previous game. While no news has been heard, the team announced it shortly after the release of *Esther* and it was revealed to be based around six characters with interweaving stories. Whether or not this is the unannounced project set for 2015 remains to be seen.

DAN: Games have always traditionally been seen as simple. I think it's nice and interesting to see games like *BioShock Infinite* that go 'Actually, let's keep following the rabbit hole and see how deep it goes.' They didn't stop short. They kept going deep, kept going complex. That's so much more interesting. If you choose to make games and my primary drive is to make games interesting, then they're going to be complex games. On the flipside you have the Terry Cavanagh thing of looking for that really pure experience.

ANDREW: I think *Super Hexagon* and *Dear Esther* are really close. They're both about how much you can take away while still being a game by the end of it.

ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING...

DAN: If you have a book you effectively have one delivery device for the story. If you have an opera you have two delivery devices. If you've got a game you've got a whole bunch of delivery devices for the story, and if you don't try to find a way to use each device to tell the story best then you might as well not bother. For me it's interesting seeing a game evolve beyond the point where it's a backdrop to the action, where every single thing on the screen communicates information. Just by placing a very simple object in an environment, having a vase on the left-hand side or the right-hand side of the mantelpiece, can make a difference to the interpretation of what the player pulls out of the story. That's just intrinsically fascinating and I think you should always try and do that.

SINDRE: In the new game [Untitled 2015] the environment plays such a massive role in terms of conveying the story, emotion and atmosphere in a game. It's one of those areas where there's a lot of room for experimentation. But I find it really hard to talk about without saying things I shouldn't...

DAN: If you *can* show it visually, you *should* be showing it, not putting it in a voiceover, not describing or talking about it. Music functions to communicate an emotional plot stream. The game should be able to function with visuals and music alone. I should be able to listen to the *Dear Esther* soundtrack in sequence and still get a suggestion of story.

WHAT'S AHEAD FOR THE STUDIO...

DAN: We've got a game we're making now that we can't talk about but that's significant project. I think the biggest challenge for us, as a studio, is how we manage growth. Jess and I share this idea that we're only as good as our team. And I have a problem with the inevitable boom and bust economics of a lot of game development. You hire a lot of people, you do a project and then you fire them all again. I don't like that. I prefer to have a company that keeps a smaller but more stable consistent team and working together over long periods develops that trust and that relationship. It's also about making games that people really enjoying making. The moment we start making a game we don't enjoy then there's no point.

JESSICA: My priority is protecting what Dan and I do well. We need to protect our jobs and continue to grow. What makes The Chinese Room really good source is the creative things. It's about writing being at the heart of it and music being really essential. Actually, carving out the time for Dan and I to continue doing that is quite a unique challenge. It is a composer and writer at the head of a studio and that is quite unusual.



"The colour scheme is pure Eighties nightclub… and the opening sequence echoes a 16-bit Commando"

ALEX TROWERS, BOSS ALIEN, DESIGNER



WHY I ♥...

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon

ALEX TROWERS
DESIGNER, BOSS ALIEN

It has dragons in it. Not only that, but the dragons fire laser beams from their eyes. What do you mean that's not enough? The colour scheme is pure Eighties nightclub and the soundtrack could have been lifted from any action movie of the era. The opening sequence echoes a 16-bit Commando*; the first mission is pure* Predator*. The tutorial… is frankly hilarious for any number of reasons, which easily makes it the Best Tutorial Ever.*

But what about the game itself? Well it's a pretty solid FPS, as you'd expect seeing as how it's basically Far Cry 3*. There's some open world, and the method of assaulting each enemy compound is left entirely up to the player. Guns blazing? Stealth? Or just dropping the Mega Shields, allowing the Blood Dragons in. It's the humour and reverence to the theme that wins it for me. That and the dragons.*

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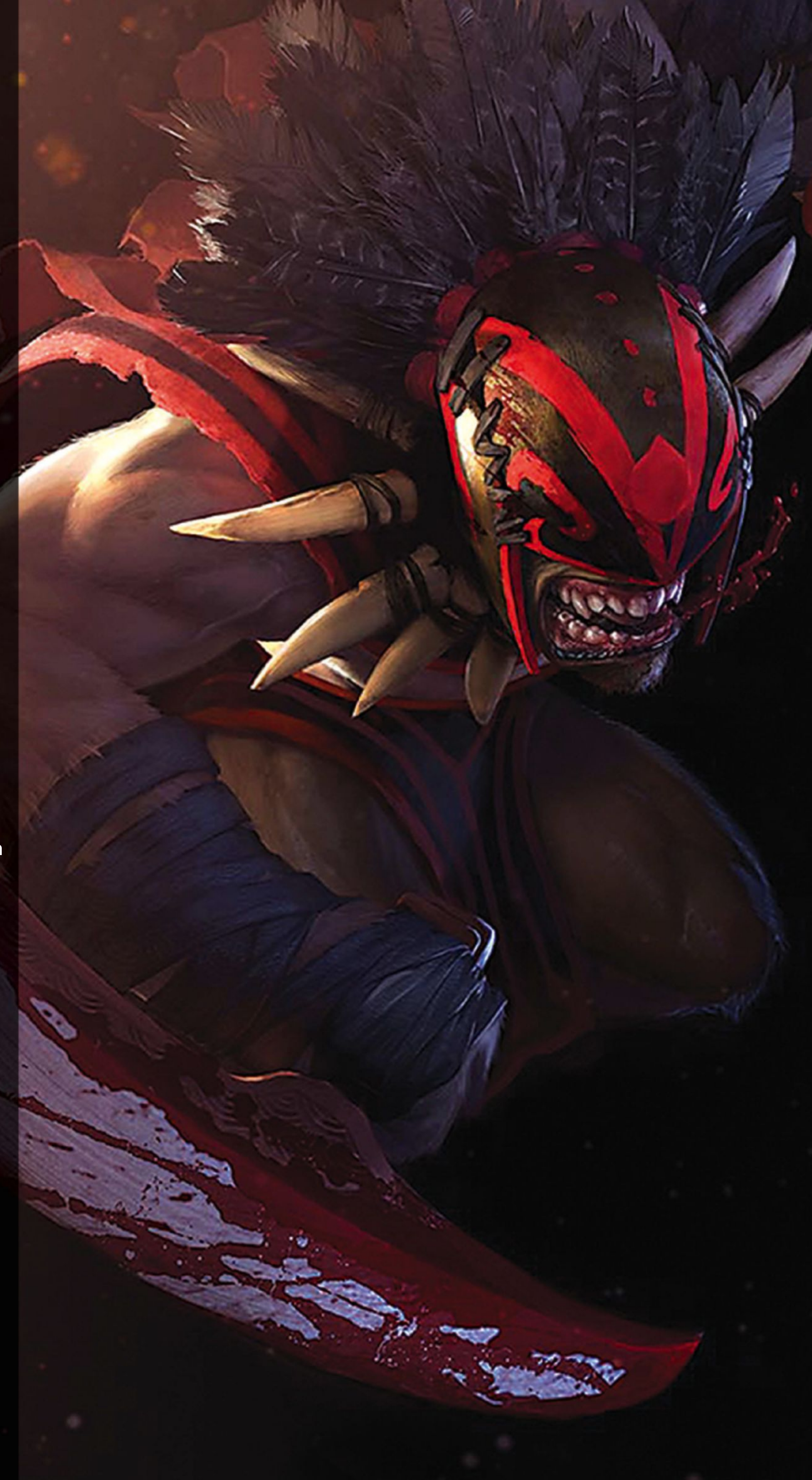
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Reviews



98
Dota 2
Valve's MOBA sequel finally makes its long-awaited debut



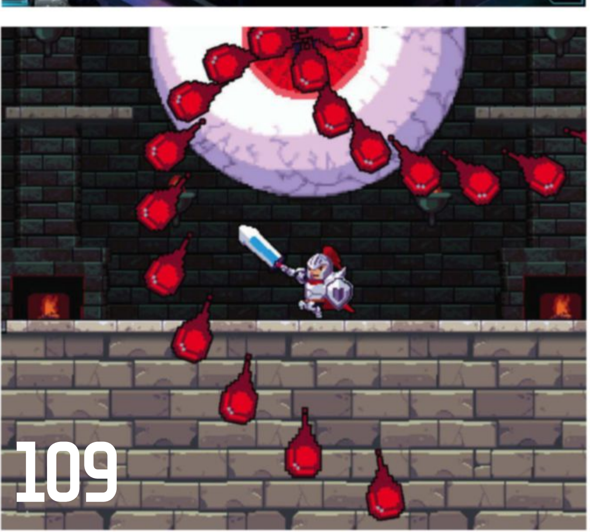
THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

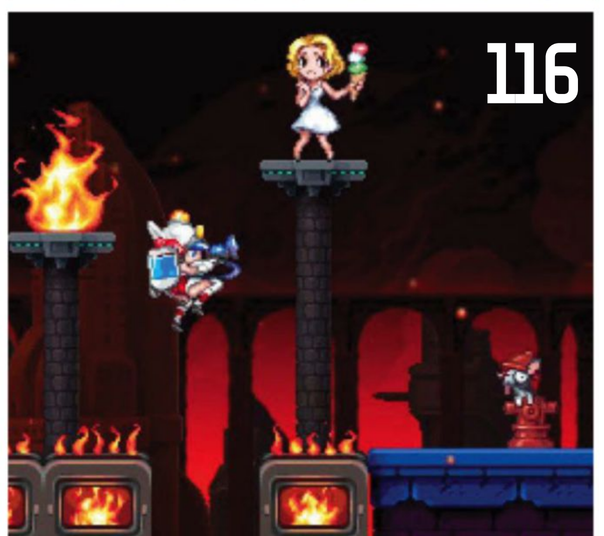












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IT'S FINALLY OUT OF BETA, AND READY TO SHOW THE GENRE ITS PREDECESSOR INVENTED HOW IT'S DONE

Dota 2

There are two key things to know about *Dota 2*. First, while it may look simple, it's one of the most complex, time-consuming, unforgiving, and unintuitive games you will ever play. The second is that even so, its active playerbase dwarfs anything else on Steam – at the time of writing, 328,512 active players vs. the next game down's 45,503, with many other games like *League Of Legends* and *Smite* and *Heroes of Newerth* and *Super Monday Night Combat* taking the same basic core mechanics and putting their own spins on them. The original *Defense Of The Ancients* was a humble *Warcraft III* mod. Now, it's a genre in and of itself, the wider RTS world's current licence to print money, and an esports phenomenon.

The basic gist is that there are two teams of five players each, each player using RTS controls to manage one chosen hero from a pool of over 100 – anyone from Sniper, whose name gives away his speciality, to Razor, a revenant with a bag of lightning based magic spells. Both teams have a base in opposite corners of the map, separated by three lanes, protected by defensive towers, with a jungle full of neutral monsters in the middle and a river carving the map into Radiant and Dire territories. Each base regularly spawns weak soldiers, 'creeps', who march down those lanes and beat up or smash anything in their way, with the Heroes lending their extra power, fighting amongst themselves, and levelling up (a non-persistent kind – everyone starts every game at Level 1) to unlock and upgrade abilities and earn the gold needed to buy items. Whichever team blows up the other's base first wins. Easy, yes?

No. Please squeeze your thumb and forefinger together. Lift it to your eyes, and squint at the imperceptible, molecular gap between them. That is how much of *Dota 2* the above explanation actually covers, and while the raw basics can be picked up relatively fast, to actually get good requires literally hundreds of hours – to 'know' the tactics and hero combinations that make for good teamwork, balancing your hero's needs with the bigger picture, to master jungling and runes and ganking, and to some extent, to internalise concepts that haven't so much been designed as allowed to beneficially congeal over *DOTA*'s first decade. Just for starters, this is a game with an item that lets you eat trees to regain health, which it calls a Tango for no explained reason, has Secret Shops that aren't secret at all, and features a core mechanic that you only get gold from an enemy by landing the killing blow – the 'last hit'. Originally, that was a hard limitation of the *Warcraft III* engine. At this point, it's simply tradition, and a core mechanic players expect. Even the game's name takes part in the great confusion party; this isn't *Defense Of The Ancients 2*, it's simply *Dota 2*.

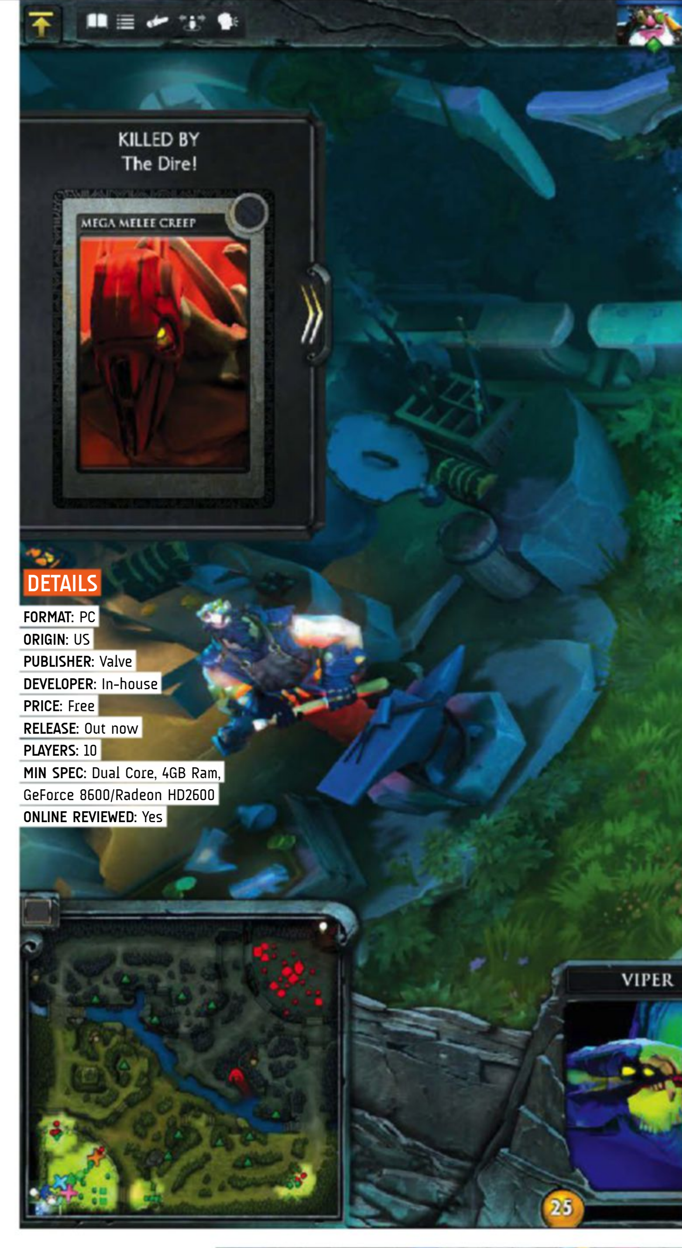
You're not however on your own, with some of *Dota 2*'s best features focusing on getting anyone willing to spend the time up to speed. There's a six part tutorial which starts with scripted demonstrations of elements like last-hitting, but quickly advances to more hands-on fare using a limited pool of 20 starter-friendly heroes. First you fight one AI hero in a battle for a single lane and its defensive towers – a quick battle it's recommended you replay ten times to try out different characters. After that, there's a full game against a sleepy AI team. Finally, you join fellow rookies for a real game, again with the limited character pool, safe in the knowledge that everyone will be flapping around to at least some extent.

There's no easy way into *Dota 2*, but this is as smooth an introduction as it's possible to get. Even after this though, the help keeps coming. The UI supports player-made Guides (see "The Hero's Guide") that help cut through the complexity in favour of just saying "Buy this. Learn that," and are a fantastic boost. It's also possible to learn by watching games in progress, filtered by skill level or hero. Not sure how, say, Anti-Mage works? Open a game where someone's playing with him, and you can watch over their shoulder – UI, stats and all. You can also simply watch high level games, a dynamic camera bouncing between players, and chat with other spectators. All this may seem like mere wrapping around the actual

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IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

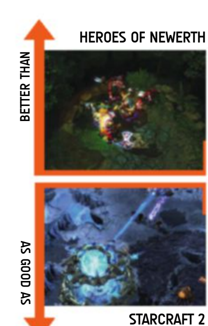
A MOD TO STAND ALONE: Free-to-play, professionally remade, polished to a fine shine and tournament ready.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Valve
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 10
MIN SPEC: Dual Core, 4GB Ram, GeForce 8600/Radeon HD2600
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Above: Razor's plasma wave attack deals more damage the further from him you're standing. Learning subtleties like this is one of *Dota 2*'s biggest early challenges.



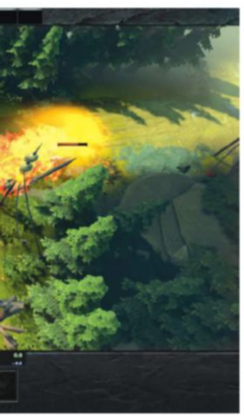
BETTER THAN: HEROES OF NEWERTH

AS GOOD AS: STARCRAFT 2



Above: There are no 'Quests' outside the tutorial, and they only scratch the real game's surface. They do offer a no-pressure environment to experiment with 20 heroes, though.

WHAT MAKES DOTA 2 BRILLIANT IS ALSO WHAT MAKES IT FRUSTRATING, BRUTAL AND UNFORGIVING





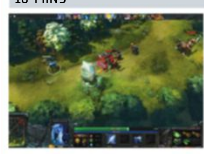
DOTA 2 VS. LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

This is the Holy War, with both games both based on the original *DOTA* and boasting at least one major developer from it. *League Of Legends* is the more cheerful game, with three maps, and an extra called Dominion. It's also more arcadey than *Dota 2*, with faster play and more focus on targeted attacks, or 'skillshots'. Despite their similarities, they're different enough that 'best' is a tough call, with fans of both games claiming victory. As a newcomer, past *DOTA* players will definitely prefer *Dota 2*, and its guides/tutorials are the best in the genre so far. Firing up *LOL* though feels more like learning to play a game than taking up a new lifestyle, with Dominion offering a very casual-friendly way to slip into the action.



THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS



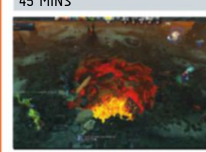
It's likely that no heroes have died yet. Everyone's racing to level up, gather gold, and buy essential items, with border skirmishes around towers ending in retreat rather than death.

30 MINS



Towers are now under siege across the whole map, with heroes tough enough to risk takedown strikes. Towers lost are important, but it's their levels/stats that are key to victory.

45 MINS

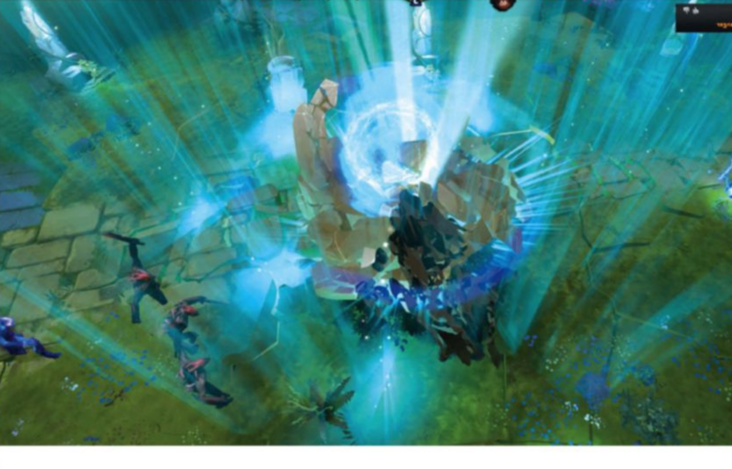


With at least one lane's towers down, there's constant pressure on the Ancient in the middle of the base. At this point, it's hard for the defensive team to claw a victory, though not impossible.



Below: The middle lane is the toughest, with one hero usually fighting solo against possible reinforcements from every side.





Above: It's dangerous. If your spare time is already precious, *Dota 2*s feedback loop will steal those remaining hours. But it won't be wasted.

THE HERO'S GUIDE

Dota 2 offers two types of guide, both very helpful. The first is accessible like any other Steam game's – through the Shift-Enter web interface. These are text based and cover everything from getting started and playing various team roles, to tips on specific heroes. Even handier though are the ones integrated into the game itself. Pick one, variants usually being available for different builds, and extra info is added straight to the game UI. The Shop is extended with a set of selected items for different stages of the game, while levelling up will light the next recommended skill to put a point in and often offer a snippet of advice on where and when to use it. You don't have to use these features, but they're always there.





game, but when that game is this damn complicated, it's crucial. Valve really couldn't have done much better at it, and playing *Dota 2* now is just a question of wanting to.

The game itself does an equally good job of taking the tried and tested *Defense Of The Ancients* mechanics and applying layers and layers of polish. It looks great, if zoomed in a little close for comfort, with day/night cycles, satisfyingly chunky models and screen-ripping spell effects. Invisible developer sweat drips off everything, from the clink of coins to the thump of sword hitting creep. The heroes don't have quite as much character as the *League Of Legends* gang, but they are more serious and grounded in design (and in the case of the female ones, don't feel like they were all designed for the sole benefit of titillating their heterosexual male players.)

There are heroes for every conceivable playstyle and level of complexity, from knights on horseback and demon lords to the pet spewing spider Broodmother. Each hero plays very differently, even the ones with apparent thematic similarities. Play as Sniper for instance, and most skill upgrades are to range and damage, with his 'Ultimate' attack being a devastating assassination shot. He's largely ineffective against a good player though, as that one good shot is all he's got aside from a weak area effect slowdown that costs points to make useful. As an example, fellow ranged hero Drow Ranger doesn't have the same layout only with the addition of a bow, but is an initially weak supporter who can slow enemies and silence magic users. At higher levels though, she also gets the power to buff nearby units to a shine, and a passive Ultimate that automatically makes her more dangerous while enemies are at a distance. That makes her more complicated (though she's dirt simple compared to others), but far more flexible.

There's no getting round the fact though that getting a grip on everyone demands hard work and harder lessons; a common first one being that Bloodseeker's Ultimate, Rupture, deals damage based on whether you move, and that there's nothing stopping him beating up a frozen hero or having a teammate force their hand with a complementary skill.

Players tend to be unforgiving of mistakes, partly because a *Dota 2* match can easily last an hour, partly because it's very easy to forget that everyone was a clueless newbie once, but mostly because this is one of those games where failure breeds failure. Heroes spend much of the game fencing and facing off like cats rather than actually fighting to the death, simply because of the cost. Dying means your team losing a fifth of its power until you respawn, you losing time that should have been spent pushing forwards and earning gold/XP, your lane being left at least partly undefended, and just to put the cherry on top, whoever killed you being rewarded, both directly and with more time to level and gather gold, giving them a better chance in the inevitable rematch. Cue complaints, accusations of 'feeding' as if it was intentional sabotage, and sometimes a few exciting new insults to collect.

Even with the ability to report unsportsmanlike behaviour, this makes for an intimidating atmosphere, and one best avoided if your skin is thinner than at least a couple of welded steel plates. At the same time though, muting mouthy players is easy, things have been surprisingly civil since the end of the beta (though there's no telling how long that will last) and the tension when everything flows properly is worth the odd idiot. Every round is a frenzied mix of movement and tactics and fighting for any available edge, with little downtime to take a breath until one side is basking in victory and the other is typing 'gg' through gritted teeth. It may lead to explosions, but it's also the path to intense – if temporary – camaraderie.

This can be present even in public games, but for best effect, *Dota 2* demands to be played with a group of friends on a regular basis. It's also technically possible to play a game against AI bots, but that's for training/hero practice only. Without real opponents, with nothing on the line, the constant back-and-forth gets boring fast. Aside from anything else, only with fellow organics can you really delight in a trap well sprung or a stupid mistake exploited.

Even in loss though, you can be sure it was a fair fight. Like its rivals, *Dota 2* is free-to-play, and the purest take on it. Games are about the heroes, with no persistence between games or extra layers like *League Of Legends*' runes/spells. There are technically levels to climb to by earning Battle Points (experience), but they don't affect game balance at all. Everyone also has access to the entire roster from the off, with no characters to pay for or unlock.

Instead, purchases are primarily cosmetic items, like armour sets, new HUDs, alternative in-game announcers like Rucks from *Bastion*, and booster to speed up Battle Point collection. Prices are high, going from 50p for something simple like a retextured bracer to £23 to give Lina the Slayer – for anime fans, yes, and she even has a Dragon Slave spell – a head of burning flames instead of simply red hair. Even the highest-ticket items don't affect the game though, and a player who never spends a penny will never be at a disadvantage against an equally skilled millionaire unless a round turns into a fashion show. Which never happens.

Prior to its official release, recommending *Dota 2* was little different to suggesting going camping in a lion enclosure. Learning the ropes demanded an experienced friend or four, plenty of time, and enough research to write a thesis on the game just to play it. Now, that's changed. Those friends certainly won't go amiss if you've got them, but the in-game tutorials and stack of player-written guides available directly within the game and in Steam mean that anyone can at least get on the first rung of the ladder. The rest of the climb remains intimidating, but what makes *Dota 2* a frustrating, brutal and unforgiving experience also turns out to be what makes it such a brilliant one. Yes, it demands effort, patience and more than a little homework. Push through the pain barrier though, and it's just as quick to reward it, with the most refined take on the genre yet, and by far the best way to give it a try.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGEHTER

RPG MEETS RTS: That's the core of *Dota 2* – heroes fighting and levelling in a tactically rich environment, with no base building, and the regular foot soldiers handling their own orders.

FAQs

Q. IS THIS A MOBA?

Yes and no. The term MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) is from *League Of Legends*; *Dota 2* players prefer the term ARTS (Action RTS).

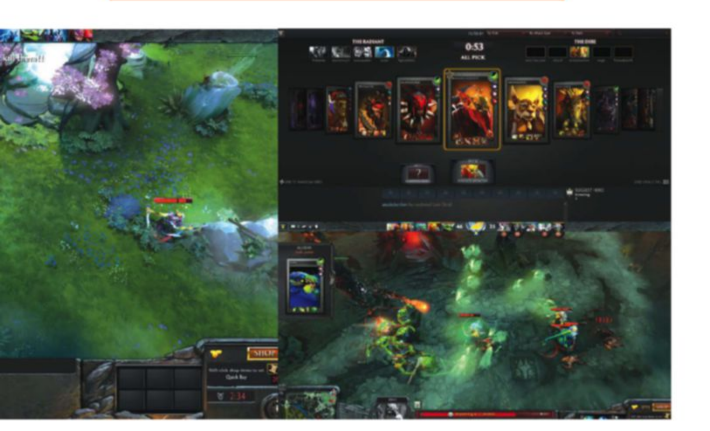
Q. ONLY ONE MAP?

Like Chess, you only need one. The variety in *Dota 2* comes from tactics and team compositions, not terrain.

Q. CAN I TEAM UP WITH FRIENDS?

Absolutely, though playing alongside higher ranking teammates in matchmade games can mean being pulled into battles you're not ready for.

VALVE COULDN'T HAVE DONE MUCH BETTER. PLAYING DOTA NOW IS JUST A QUESTION OF WANTING TO





VERDICT 9/10

KING OF THE CREEPS, IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY

WHAT COMES AFTER

The Walking Dead: 400 Days

The concept of DLC in an episodic game is pretty bizarre to wrap your head around, but Telltale has never really been one for following trends. After pretty much creating the episodic gaming concept with *Sam And Max Save The World* back in 2006, it then went on to reinvent itself last year as the industry's premiere storyteller, scooping up Baftas and Game Of The Year awards thanks to the glorious first season of *The Walking Dead.*

Regardless, *400 Days* is technically DLC for the first season of *The Walking Dead*, although it has very little to do with it. This standalone episode tells the individual stories of five new characters, each one taking place within the first 400 days since the outbreak of whatever terrible nastiness is causing all this deceased ambling in the first place. It's a clever conceit, and largely well executed. We began with Vince, though it's up to you which order you play them in, a young fellow with a fashionable haircut and a slightly less fashionable beard. His whole story takes place exclusively on a prison bus, where you're physically chained to two other inmates. It's a brilliantly executed example of both *The Walking Dead* fiction and Telltale's signature gameplay in microcosm, and it exhilarates throughout its shortened duration.

As before, the majority of your interaction with the world is done through dialogue choice. If you choose to peek behind the curtains, you'll see how it's all put together – clever editing and supremely crafted speech means that a scene can play out in many different ways using the exact same words (much like 'reality' TV). As with Season One, though, it's far better to just inhale the whole thing in one go and not double check your decisions.

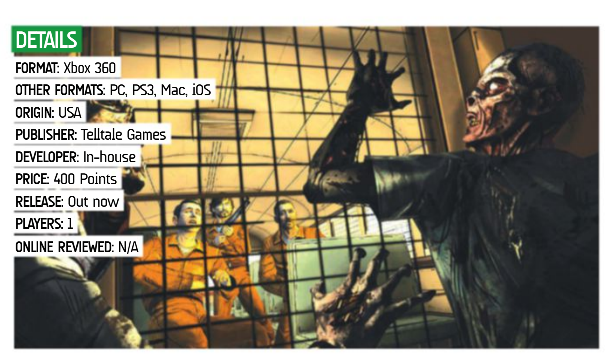
THE WALKING DEAD SURVIVAL INSTINCT

BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

THE WALKING DEAD SEASON ONE

And like before, those decisions carry some weight. Without veering into spoiler territory, there are multiple life and death decisions in the game and they all shock. Some of these are likely unavoidable, but do a great job of suggesting otherwise, and when they hit, they hit hard. Perhaps the truncated nature of the storytelling means that the impact of these incessant 'moments' are nullified in comparison to Season One's greatest sequences, but for a game that's pitched purely as a snapshot sidestory, it's still very effective, with a lot of credit to the writing team.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 400 Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

400 Days is still running on Telltale's creaky, stop-and-start engine, but the quality of the dialogue is premier league stuff. *Idle Thumbs* alumni Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin have taken a backseat on the penmanship duties here, letting new talent like Sean Ainsworth mix with Hollywood scribe Gary Whitta and other Telltale writers. Nevertheless, the high standard is maintained throughout.

One standout moment comes in a conversation between 'The Dude' lookalike Wyatt and his driving buddy Eddie. Even though they're in the middle of a crisis, their slow relaxation into a natural and long-standing patter is just very good writing. It's comic relief tinged with tension, and you can gain insights into both of their characters and their pasts without any need for exposition or outright explanation. Quite simply put, it's just engaging. It's why the action stuff works as well as it does – it's so beautifully offset.

Of course, despite the best efforts of all involved, some of the episodes don't connect as well as others. They're all loosely interwoven, so the order you play them in may lend certain sights and sounds more gravity, but there's still little doubt that certain characters have a more connection than others. Season One got around this by giving people like Ben and Katja time to grow and develop, but *400 Days* doesn't have that luxury. So, while Vince, Bonnie and Wyatt enjoy consistently exciting narratives, the slower more adventure-game paced tale of Shel and her young sister doesn't manage to capture your attention in the same way.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PHOTO BOOTH: Pick the stories in any order from a photo board menu.
STORYTELLING: There are some clever new ways of interacting that evolve from the first season.

FAQs

Q. WORTH THE MONEY?
Absolutely. The quality of the writing is on par with the original series. It might only be a couple of hours long, but the entertainment value is high.

Q. BEST CHARACTER?
For us, probably Wyatt and his buddy. Everyone will have a different favourite though.

Q. AS GOOD AS SEASON ONE?
No, because the shocks are too frequent and there's not enough time to bond with characters, but it's still classy.

It pitches significant decisions your way, but they're fairly easy to take for granted as you've not had time enough to consider every angle.

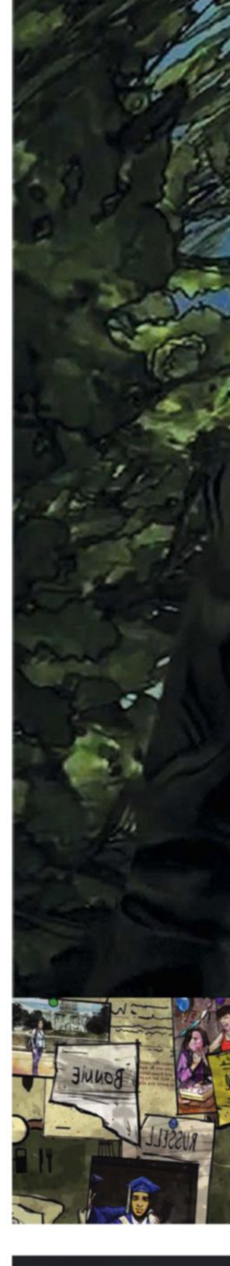
It's best, then, to try and role-play each character as themselves rather than yourself. If Lee from Season One was a well-drawn extension of your own reactions to this situation, the ensemble cast of *400 Days* are more instantly defined. Quickly imagining how they would act in each case makes for a more interesting experience than trying to play 'good' or 'bad'. And as each decision ultimately carries less weight, it's a nice chance to play the asshole for once. In all honesty, who had it in them to play Lee as a prick? Here, you can do so with scant regard, and it's devilishly enjoyable.

As a piece of content, *400 Days* is still pretty much essential. There are genuine gameplay improvements that suggest what we might see in Season Two, including an interactive chase through a cornfield and a testy dash across a car park under gunfire. And while the controls are still pretty convoluted (switching sticks for no reason, buttons not responding), there's nothing that gets in the way of the story. Once again, it goes to show that you don't need to cram a load of ropey interaction into a *Walking Dead* game to get an emotional response. Yes, that was aimed at you, *Survival Instinct.*

400 Days isn't the equal of Season One, and nor could it ever have been. And even though it only clocks in at just over two hours, it's still intoxicating stuff. Go in expecting a lighter, less consequential and more scattergun approach to *The Walking Dead* template, and you'll leave with what you wanted, yet hungry for more.



VERDICT 8/10
MORE OF A GOOD THING

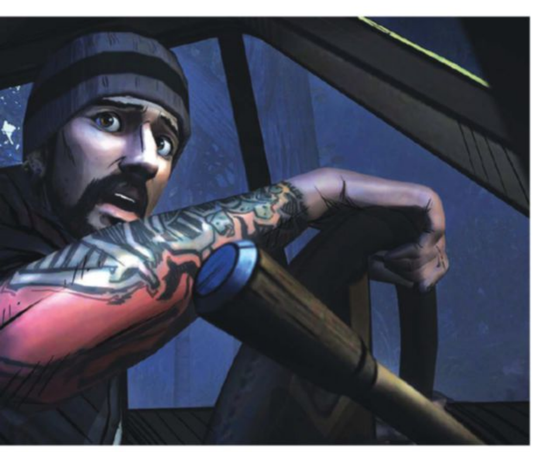




A BRILLIANTLY EXECUTED EXAMPLE OF BOTH THE WALKING DEAD FICTION AND TELLTALE'S SIGNATURE GAMEPLAY IN MICROCOSM

Above: Nothing in the game hits as hard as Season One's most gut-wrenching moments, but there are still some fine shocks and moments of contemplation that outdo most other games.

Left: The engine still stutters and sputters. Hopefully Season Two will fix these elementary issues.





Above: Telltale's artists do great work in their characterisations, and its animators understanding of expressions and – in particular – eyes, is first class. Not many games let you read mood when no words are spoken.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

400 Days operates on a slightly different structure to Season One, allowing you to pick one of five characters from a bulletin board, and then experience their story incongruously with the others. This means there is naturally less weight to your choices as each story takes fewer than thirty minutes to experience, but it does allow the writers to cram in a Season's worth of drama into the equivalent of one episode. Ultimately, your choices end up affecting the story in a specific way, which reveals itself it at the end, but it's never as fulfilling as anything in the first proper season.

FROM KICKSTARTER DARLING TO FULLY FLEDGED RPG, THE FUTURE FOR SHADOWRUN RETURNS LOOKS BRIGHT AND DYSTOPIAN

Shadowrun Returns

With *Shadowrun Returns*, there's an overarching sense that Harebrained Schemes is trying to cover all its bases. Rather than put all their chickens in the basket of a huge isometric RPG campaign comparable in length and breadth as the greats like *Baldur's Gate* and *Torment*, they've instead focused on creating a tightly guided experience that spans over the course of ten hours or so, and left the rest up to the community.

Among the first of the major Kickstarter success stories to actually be released, *Shadowrun Returns* was always on the weirder end of the spectrum when compared to the other nostalgia-filled proposals such as *Wasteland* and *Elite*. Instead of having a previous game that's being given a new lick of paint and a modern engine, *Shadowrun* is most famous for being a pen and paper roleplaying game, more akin to a cyberpunk *Dungeons & Dragons* than anything else.

And it's here that *Shadowrun Returns* feels most at home, adopting all the sensibilities of a dungeon master in the way it tells its story, filling in atmospheric narrative where its often beautiful but somewhat limited graphics can't quite do the job. At key moments during the campaign you'll be informed of the smells and sounds of a room, or given brief descriptions of characters that go beyond the stylised portraits that accompany their speech.

This is a world with the aesthetic of *Blade Runner* and the fantasy sensibilities of *Lord Of The Rings*, where elves run in gangs, and each night club is blockaded by the sizable muscle mass of an ogre. Magic flows as easily as information, and in between the two you've got the deckers, slipping into cyberspace to manipulate the physical world from the digital. It sounds like a mess, when you write it out, but in reality it's in the moments where these systems interact that *Shadowrun Returns* is at its strongest.

Being a turn and party-based RPG, positioning and ability order are paramount to victory, and when you're fighting a battle across different mediums, the way that you behave can have knock-on effects that feel systemic in a way that's surprisingly rewarding, the first few times you engage with it. Having a hacker manage to turn the enemy's turrets against them, or shut down the elevators that are bringing in reinforcements, draws you into the world that much more; you can see what's happening when you press this button, in a real and tangible way that isn't just shooting a dude, and that's a rare pleasure.

Shadowrun Returns' campaign takes you through the criminal underbelly of future Seattle, as well as a quick tour of the upper echelons of its Megacorporation-driven elite, assaulting office complexes as well as dealer slums, filled with the catatonic bodies of *Better Than Life* addicts, literally living their lives vicariously through those of others, with a little technological aid. It's abundantly clear that this is a world that is steeped in history and a dizzying clarity when it comes to the ways people interact, how the social structures are formed, and how people decide to escape from the worst of it all.

Which comes with the territory when you're adapting the decades of work that have gone into *Shadowrun*'s pen and paper version. The biggest surprise here is how easily the exposition slots into place without being unpleasantly blunt or overly obvious. The plot follows the attempts of your character to track down the killer of an old acquaintance, in the hope of receiving your deceased friend's life insurance payout once you find him some justice. It feels like there's a conscious attempt to keep the scope of the story restrained rather than global, and while it loses some of that restraint in the later stages, it just about manages to sidestep turning you into a messiah figure.

Regardless of Harebrained Schemes' success or failure when it comes to the main campaign, it's impossible to shake the

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Tablet
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Harebrained Schemes
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.4ghz Processor, 2GB Ram, 256MB Graphics, 2GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: Harebrained Schemes makes sure to give you memorable characters and companions that don't feel narratively cajoled into fighting alongside or helping you. They all have their own reasons, and once those are satisfied they return to their own stories.

THE TRUE VALUE OF SHADOWRUN RETURNS IS GOING TO BE FOUND NOT IN WHAT IS AVAILABLE ON DAY ONE

BETTER THAN
KRATER

WORSE THAN
BALDUR'S GATE

FIGHTING ON ALL FRONTS

The best battles in *Shadowrun Returns* are fought on multiple different planes, bringing the whims of the mystical to bear along with futuristic weaponry, arcane spells and ritualistic elementals. Even beyond that, properly harnessing the power of cyberspace to turn the very environment against your enemies can play a deciding factor.

At their best, these fights work to enhance the narrative as well as the gameplay, with your shadowrunners in the real world desperately fending off enemies while your hacker finds an exit or alters the environment in your advantage. It feels somewhere between *The Matrix* and every hacker movie ever, but to play it is a thrill that adds depth and a strategic flow that's wholly unique.

FAQs

Q. DO I NEED TO KNOW SHADOWRUN?
No, although every environment is rich with nods to established brands and themes from the fiction.

Q. ARE THERE CLASSES?
In essence, although your character isn't limited by anything but race, which caps progression in certain fields.

Q. CAN I BE AN ELF SAMURAI?
Sure, but you could also be a troll hacker, or a dwarf mage, which are a little less clichéd.

Left: The digital world is realised with the neon that defines cyberpunk, and follows its own mechanics and systems. Cause too much of a mess and you'll be attacked by defensive hackers, at the risk of brain death if they defeat you.

Above: Companion characters are often just as powerful as you, if not occasionally more so, making your party refreshingly competent.

feeling that this is somewhat of a stopgap to tide people over before the real meat of *Shadowrun Returns* starts to come to the fore. Coming packaged with Steam Workshop integration and a comprehensive and powerful editor, there is already one sizable player-made campaign available for download, and if *Shadowrun*'s storied heritage of allowing players to create stories in its world is anything to go by, the true value of *Shadowrun Returns* is going to be found not in what is available on day one, but what happens on a personal and creative level over the next six months, or the next couple of years.

What players can't do on their own is rectify some of the niggles that are inherent to the engine that they'll create those stories in. It's often a frustrating exercise to select the right target in combat, and we regularly had the misfortune of sending a ranged character within punching distance of some large unpleasant because we didn't select quite the right pixel before clicking. Similarly, there were a few times we had to completely restart the game after a scripted trigger didn't fire, for whatever reason.

All this together makes the job of recommending it an unfortunately awkward one. On the one hand what's already here is enjoyable and compelling, for the comparatively short amount of time it'll take you to play through it, but the promise of more makes us feel like *Shadowrun Returns* is only going to grow in value as time goes on. If the players really latch onto the capabilities of the editor, it's going to be an incredible rich offering, and one that could theoretically never stop giving.

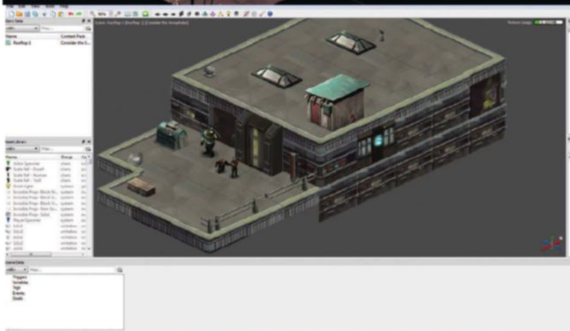
CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

CREATE: With Steam Workshop integration, players should find it incredibly simple to add new campaigns and tilesets to their game, and it's here that the real value of *Shadowrun Returns* lies.



IMPRESSIVE, BUT THE TRUE VALUE HAS YET TO COME





Above: Despite its stark appearance, *Shadowrun Returns*' editor is deceptively friendly, and it wasn't hard to add triggers and dialogue trees to a scene. Coupled with the ability to create environments out of tiles there's a lot you can do with it.

MY LIFE FOR A MANA LOBE

Tales Of Xillia

Square Enix critics have long been in the mindset that the JPRG is a genre on life support, in need of reinvention to survive in a global market. Tales Studio took a different path. After redefining JRPG combat in its infancy it has stuck to its familiar formula ever since. While *Final Fantasy* tries to win our approval with drastic changes and pastiches of Western design, the *Tales* series continues to pump out by-the-numbers JRPGs. To some, this may sound like the death of creativity, while traditionalists might applaud a classic experience. In reality, *Tales Of Xillia* is a bit of both, for better and worse.

Our story takes place in a world called Rieze Maxia. For the first time in the series, players are given the choice of two protagonists as the game begins, but as the plot is barely affected it's not a particularly important one. When you consider that players can control any party member whenever they desire, the choice becomes even less significant. The first hero is medical student Jude, an irritatingly earnest tousle-haired teen who ticks just about every JRPG protagonist box. Second is Milla Maxwell, a mysterious woman who claims to be an incarnation of the lord of all spirits, the god-figure ridiculously known as Maxwell. It's not a particularly divine name, but Milla's magical powers back up her claims.

The two main characters meet by chance investigating a mysterious lab, and events quickly conspire to make them fugitives, setting them off on a journey across the world. So far, so standard. It's an averagely whimsical JRPG plot, full of nonsense like mana lobes and lilium orbs, dwelling on themes of technology vs. nature as the spirits that power society are threatened by scientific advances. It's not a particularly original tale, but is told in a competent enough manner to remain interesting. Jude is initially annoying and vanilla, but shows a surprising amount of backbone and humour as the plot opens up. Milla is less compelling, mysterious and aloof by design, but seeing a female character wielding considerable power and uninterested in romantic pursuits is refreshing. The supporting cast is hit-and-miss, with some interesting characters offset by some irritatingly shrill clichés.

Dashing hitman Alvin is something of a stock character but is entertaining nonetheless, and elderly butler Rowen is the most original and likeable member of the party. Less welcome is Jude's childhood friend Leia, upbeat to the point of madness. Noble yet ruthless monarch Gaius is another interesting addition, adding some shades of grey as well as more crazy hair. Overall, it's one of the better casts we've seen in the genre in recent years, only falling into standard tropes on occasion. Unfortunately,

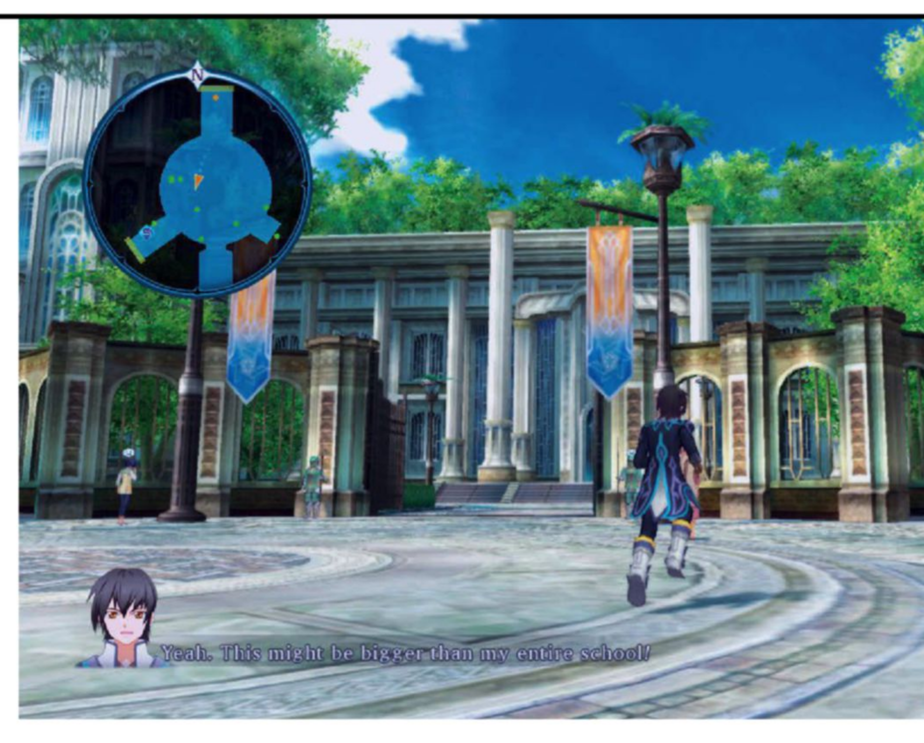
DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai Games
DEVELOPER: Namco Tales Studio
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

ENHANCED

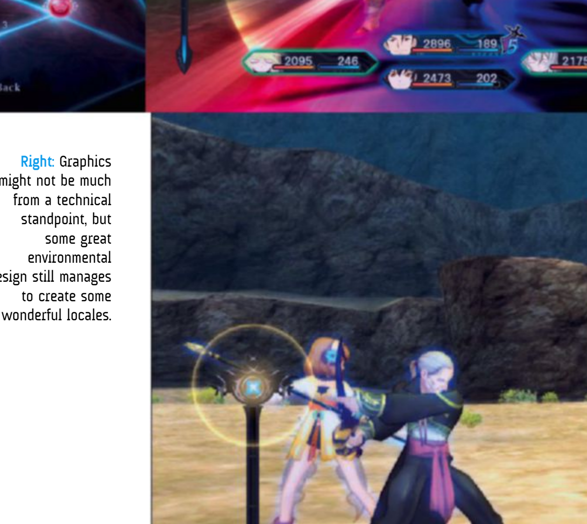
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MISSING LINK: The new pairing system in combat adds another welcome layer to classic mechanics. Switching to different partners on the fly and performing flashy combination attacks is satisfying.



Below: The lilium orb, as you can see, is obviously inspired by *Final Fantasy X*'s forward-thinking board game-like progression system. Interesting that such an idea is still be reappropriated today, as the game's HD re-release is around the corner.





Right: Graphics might not be much from a technical standpoint, but some great environmental design still manages to create some wonderful locales.

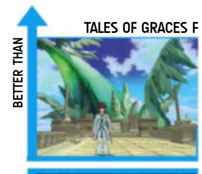
TO SOME, THIS MAY SOUND LIKE THE DEATH OF CREATIVITY, WHILE TRADITIONALISTS MIGHT APPLAUD A CLASSIC EXPERIENCE. IN REALITY, TALES OF XILLIA IS A BIT OF BOTH

Left: The blue line between characters signifies they are linked, sharing heals and buffs as well as attacking in tandem. Switching links is as simple as pressing a directional button, and each partner excels against certain types of enemies.



BETTER THAN

TALES OF GRACES F



WORSE THAN



PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE CAMERA LIKE?
For the first time in the series, *Xillia* features a fully 3D, player-controllable character. It's a nice touch but doesn't really add much.

Q. WHO IS THE BEST CHARACTER?
Grumpy old man butler Rowen gets our vote, but ruthless monarch Gaius is also pretty cool.

Q. IS THIS THE END?
Not at all. Sequel *Tales of Xillia 2* has already been released in Japan and was recently confirmed for Europe in 2014.

ALL IN THE BUILD UP

Character customisation in suitably in-depth, with a "lilium orb" system reminiscent of *Final Fantasy X*'s sphere grid. Characters get three points each level to spend as they like, choosing which stats to increase on the webbed board. Complete a section of orbs that all link together and the bonus that rests within the finished segment is your reward. Characters can also equip passive skills to affect how they play, and must choose four artes to take into battle at a time, although party members you are not currently controlling can access all their moves as they like. On top of all this you've got your standard weapon and armour systems. It adds up to give you a great level of say in how your party will develop.



the whole affair is let down by poor voice acting. *Persona* has proven that English voice acting in Japanese RPGs can be nuanced and realistic, but *Tales Of Xillia* falls back on the monotone males and high-pitched female voices that plagued Nineties anime VHS. The original Japanese voice track isn't an option, annoying for purists.

So far, so standard, but the *Tales* series has always set itself apart with its combat systems. Most JRPGs opt for turn-based, strategic fights but *Tales* games have real-time, lightning fast battles with plenty in common with action games. Players control a single character, performing attack combinations with taps of X and magical artes with O. The player can set strategies for the otherwise automated party beforehand. Control can also be switched to any character during battle whenever the player chooses, and each plays differently enough to make learning them all a considerable challenge.

It's a fast and frenetic affair that often sees battles last mere seconds, and will feel very familiar for series fans. New to *Xillia* is the ability to "link up" with another party member in combat. This sees you attack as a pair while sharing heals, buffs and ailments. Each character offers a different bonus effect when linked with, from Milla binding enemies in place to Alvin breaking their guard. It's an interesting mechanic but never feels particularly crucial, especially on the default difficulty level. Ramp up the challenge and pairing with the right characters at the right times becomes a lot more necessary.

It's a criticism that applies to the combat as a whole. The frantic pace and manic action leaves little time for actual strategy, and for the most part it isn't necessary. Mashing combos is fun, but little thought is ever required. Even at higher difficulty levels, challenge seems random, as a battle previously failed can be bested using exactly the same tactics. The initial flashy appeal can wear off as the hours drag on, revealing a battle system with plenty of style but not much substance.

Decent art direction and environmental design are let down by average graphics, with simple textures and nondescript NPCs marring some decent views. A cartoon, anime style can't hide a lack of raw power and the game doesn't look much better than the Wii-to-PS3 port *Tales Of Graces F*. Pop-in is also common when running through areas, never conducive to player immersion. It's never an ugly game thanks to the decent design, but we've seen plenty of RPGs that look much better.

It's all par for the course as far as the series goes, but isn't that the point? Tales Studio didn't set out to reinvent the JPRG. It aimed to make another solid genre entry for fans and traditionalists, and in that they succeeded. *Tales Of Xillia* is an unremarkable game, but enjoyable in its own quiet way. *Tales* fans will be more than satisfied, and classic JRPG aficionados will find plenty to enjoy also. To those less taken with the genre, *Xillia* does little to entice. And really, why does it need to?

VERDICT 7/10
FUN BUT UNINSPIRED, CLASSIC JRPG FANS WILL ENJOY



A sewer level? Cool... Deadpool might joke about how lazy that is, but that doesn't make traipsing through it for an hour any less tedious.

JOKE'S ON YOU, BUDDY

Deadpool

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Developers don't seem to have grasped the fact that while games that poke fun at their own poor design can be amusing, they *are* still poorly designed. As much as *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*'s knowingly patronising tutorial might have been entertaining at first, most smiles will have faded by the time the last unneeded prompt leaves the screen. And it's a pitfall *Deadpool* suffers from, the fourth-wall-smashing shenanigans of Marvel's wisecracking antihero unable to consistently hit the high notes of some of the game's most inventive setpieces.

In these rare instances of brilliance, we see flashes of the *Deadpool* game we *wanted* to play. Although the wry commentary on the budget design is more common, it's the moments where the game's inbuilt freedom is used to allow it to creep into other genres and play styles that really stand out. Well, those and the songs – we've never played a Marvel game where people were so poised to burst into song and as much stick as Nolan North may get for being in everything, you've got to love the gusto with which he has clearly thrown himself into this role. Between Deadpool's various personae, there are some genuinely coffee-out-of-the-nose lines and North's delivery, while likely to be too much for some, is great throughout. Between this and his turn in *The Last Of Us*? Incredible work.

But when Deadpool isn't impressing, it's almost inevitably disappointing. There's no middle ground here and outside of a few key moments when things get changed up, gameplay is only ever average at best. After seeing his flashy combo potential in Marvel Vs Capcom 3, the slower pace and wandering camera here just make it feel so much less frenetic than the character deserves and the genre demands. It feels as though it was once a more technical fighter before it was watered down with *Batman*-style counters and simplified specials, the end result being a system which is easy to exploit and hard to ever truly enjoy.

To make matters worse, High Moon occasionally insists on turning the game into a shooter, and it's an awful shooter. Gun-toting enemies are far too common and on higher difficulties, getting close can be near impossible. It's just one of many traditional genre traps *Deadpool* is guilty of stumbling into – cheap enemies and lazy battle design that just sees them flood the stage, horrible platform sections that neither mechanics or camera can keep up with... the list goes on. And while Deadpool's gaming debut will raise the odd smile, the real value of so mediocre an action game comes down to how often that happens. Which does depends on how much you like the character – there's a good two-to-three points of swing in the score here based on that alone, and it's that that will determine whether on not you should salvage Deadpool from the bargain bin or just let him make friends with Thor and Iron Man in there.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

COMBAT READY: The fighting system is close to being really good fun, but it's just too slow – and the camera too obtuse – for it to stand out in a genre packed with better examples.

BETTER THAN

THOR: GOD OF THUNDER





NINJA BLADE

WORSE THAN



VERDICT 5/10

SOMETIMES, FUNNY ALONE ISN'T ENOUGH

BUILDING SUCCESS BY MEASURES

Rogue Legacy



Above: The castle is made up of four distinct areas, each with their own boss and bestiary, and favouring different playstyles.

Just as with *Spelunky* and *The Binding of Isaac* before it, *Rogue Legacy* marries its roguelike elements with a more accessible veneer. With *Rogue Legacy*, the inspiration comes from *Castlevania*, and it's around this mechanically sound heart that the compelling nature of *Rogue Legacy* thrums. Each successive life is the offspring of the last, inheriting equipment and upgrades.

Each has a mix of different traits. First is class, the most influential in terms of abilities and base stats, but also the most subjective; we favoured the Hokage, a ninja-influenced class that trades health for damage, but the mechanics and strengths vary across sorcerers, liches and barbarians.

Then there are possible traits that each hero can bear, and a lot of the flavour of the game comes through here. Nostalgia paints the entire game in sepia, and Insanity can force you to play the entire game upside down. Less drastic traits, like Near-sightedness, have less of an impact on the mechanics, but they give some personality to what would otherwise be faceless classes. Characters become someone you remember, rather than just another run to be quickly rinsed out of your memory.

Breaking from roguelike tradition, instead of trying to make every run your possible last, *Rogue Legacy* is a war of thousand-year attrition. The knowledge that you'll probably fail is turned into an asset rather than a threat, with the gold you accumulate during a run turned into the inheritance that your offspring can spend to upgrade themselves before heading into the castle. Over time your lineage turns into an increasingly powerful line of heroes that can best parts of the castle that your ancestors could never even enter.

There's still that element of danger and consequence in place in a tax you have to pay before reentering the castle. If you don't spend your gold before heading back in, you lose what have left, preventing the accumulation of vast wealth, and locking out the more expensive upgrades until you have a great run. It rewards skill, and puts an aim in your mind each time you go on a run.

Which all adds some persistent reward to what would otherwise be a ten-minute experience, repeated ad nauseam. You feel like you're moving forward tangibly instead of just merely growing your knowledge of the game, and with each boss only needing to be bested once, there's a strong sense of progressing through the game world past each playthrough, too. There's a slight monotony to the enemy design after some time, but in the face of how pure and satisfying an experience *Rogue Legacy* manages to be.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Cellar Door Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.6Ghz processor, 1GB RAM, 400MB Hard Disk Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

ROGUELIKE: Randomised levels and characters keep each play through challenging and fresh.

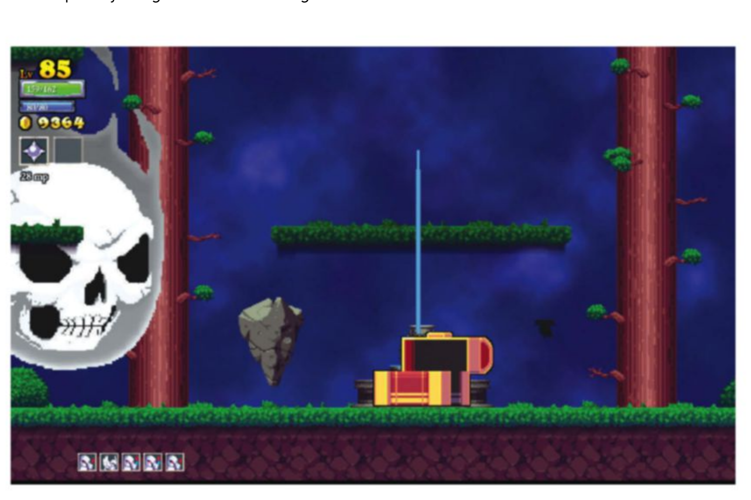
CASTLEVANIA: Adopting both the secondary spell and a lot of the layout from the series, *Rogue Legacy* feels instantly familiar.

VERDICT 8/10

A GREAT BLEND OF ROGUELIKE AND CASTLEVANIA

Below: Every dead hero adorns the family wall, letting you scroll through them and see the title given them on death





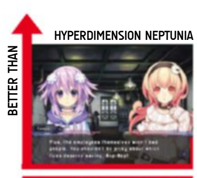
NAMCO'S MIGHTY MASH-UP IS TOO EASY FOR ITS OWN GOOD

Project X Zone

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai Games
DEVELOPER: Banpresto, Monolith Soft
PRICE: £27.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
HYPERDIMENSION NEPTUNIA





FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING
WORSE THAN

Think of it as a Justice League for games. *Project X Zone* contrives to throw 60+ characters from Namco Bandai, Capcom and Sega games into a strategy-RPG that's more interested in fan service than tactics. It's a celebratory showcase of glorious sprite art and animation which works hard to entertain its audience despite labouring to provide any kind of depth. It's at once accessible yet ultra-niche, a game that welcomes newcomers with the simplest of systems, yet one whose world will prove baffling to all but the initiated. Put it this way: if the names Sanger Zonvolt and Haken Browning prompt anything more than a vague, hazy recollection, you'll find a lot to like here.

The plot does little to disguise its ludicrousness. To summarise: portals are transporting various characters between game worlds, for reasons too convoluted to explain here. As one heroine puts it: "this is all so needlessly complicated" – just one of many examples of the script having its cake and eating it. It pokes fun at the dubious costume design, yet is happy for its female characters to remain underdressed. More successful are the myriad references to obscure Namco, Sega and Capcom franchises that will cause a swell of nerdish pride in those who get the gags.

Yet the story is merely a flimsy excuse for a whistle-stop tour through locations familiar to fans of the featured games, as well as a handful of real-world Japanese districts. These are the settings for grid-based strategy battles in which your increasing collection of characters – split off into pairs – takes on an increasing number of enemies. Not that their numbers make much difference to strategy – each skirmish sees your current couple launch a series of attacks with simple button presses, calling upon adjacent units for assistance, or an additional Solo character who you can assign to any pair with a squeeze of a shoulder button. With the ability to use several items before each turn, and many characters possessing healing moves (albeit at the cost of their XP meter which can be spent on a spectacular special), the difficulty curve is almost comically shallow. Button-mashing may not be the most efficient way to progress, but you'll rarely need to think too hard.

It's style over substance, then, but what style! *Resonance of Fate* leads cartwheel and somersault into action with guns and grenades; Frank West teams up with a giant Servbot; *Ghosts 'n' Goblins*' Arthur lobs lances and loses his clothes; and all are exceptionally drawn and animated with some of the best sprite work we've seen in a long time. It's the videogame equivalent of a firework show: you'll marvel at the pyrotechnics, but while your eyes and ears are in for a treat, there's little here to engage your brain.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BAG OF SPRITE: It's a pity the variety of characters didn't lead to a variety of mission types – with a few exceptions each mission plays out like the last. Shame, too, that items can be used without penalty.



Above: There's no way to effectively illustrate it, but *Project X Zone*'s soundtrack is exceptional, stirring in several themes from a broad range of franchises, some of which even the most casual observer of Japanese games will surely recognise.





Above: The roster of Sega characters may be unfamiliar to most, but Ulala's Solo attack is a treat for long-time fans of the beleaguered publisher – she calls in *Fantasy Zone*'s Opa-Opa and the protagonist from *Space Harrier* to assist.



A SHALLOW BUT SPECTACULAR SPRITESHOW

Left: This Ra Zombie lends another dimension to zombie battle, in the name of Ra the sun God, stealing sunlight from under your fingertips. Tricksy though he is, he's pretty weak and spews out his stolen rays upon death.

Right: Crazy Dave and his redneck Delorean serve as sterling companions on this oddest of quests for a missing taco. Their bizarre interplay, wry smiles and a tiny buzz of sexual tension make for a merry, if faintly disturbing time.

FREE-TO-PLAY ISN'T ALWAYS A DIRTY WORD, BUT WHEN A SEQUEL POPS TO THE DARK SIDE, YOU CAN'T HELP BUT BEGIN TO FEAR THE WORST

Plants Versus Zombies 2: It's About Time

Like many of its PopCap brethren, *Plants Versus Zombies* was never a game which called for a follow-up, and indeed given how well it melded together tower defence and accessibility with a myriad possibilities, why bother? Make it free-to-play, stuff it full of micro-transactions like a three-bird roast and send it on its way, obviously.

Ever-present are both plants and zombies, only now framed squarely through the exploits of Crazy Dave and his sentient, time-travelling camper-van. Taking seed packets and Miracle-Gro on your adventure, the task is fending off zombies in three locations: Ancient Egypt, somewhere piratey and the Wild West, each featuring its own tailored specimens. The curve of frenzied difficulty makes the moment-to-moment zombicide on a par with *PVZ*, but after shedding the skins and dropping the artifice, it only offers half a dozen additional crumbs.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Popcap
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



But as is the nature with that which is free, a shakedown and a spruce up should more than be enough to extend a series' life beyond a solitary existence, that is, until the cold sweat of free-to-play takes hold, and starts bleeding into the gameplay. The incursions are subtle, but once observed, can never been unseen. It doesn't so much rattle a tin in front of your face, but constructs a pyramid scheme and entices you in. Coins are a superfluous addition to be spent on bonus demi-god abilities, or plant feed, but coins can be gathered organically and the moves themselves almost seem to cheapen the fertile soil of tower defence.

The trickery and cunning lies in stars, an arbitrary collectible that holds the key to progression. Each area requires fifteen to proceed, but a first-time dash through the levels garners a measly four. Bonus levels can be unlocked, but the bulk of star collection comes in retracing familiar ground, repeating completed levels up to three times for maximum stardom, with several arbitrary caveats, such as not allowing certain plants to perish, or keeping the lawnmowers unused. Conjoined with the pre-existing bonus level mini-games, much of the game seems distracted and uninterested with straight up garden warfare, building an underlying frustration at a bogus lack of progression. These levels are notably harder too, so this minor angst creates this niggling feedback loop, which serves to encourage the player in paying to progress, and intentionally bypassing gameplay simply to prevent it from stagnating.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MOULDY CORE: A greater emphasis on purchasable unnecessary items, like skins and hats may have left the rest of the game with a slightly sweeter taste.

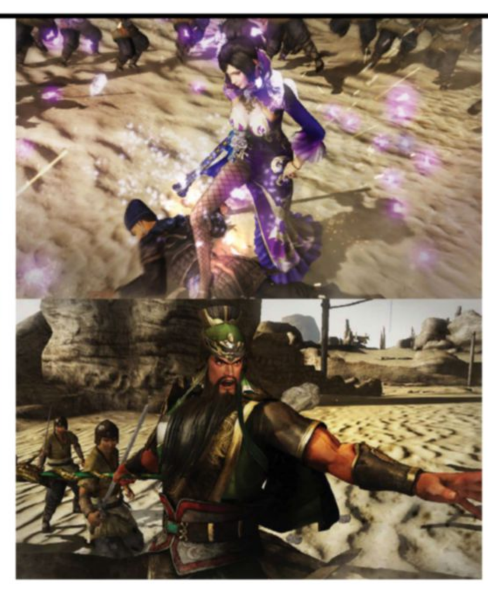
The jaunty soundtrack, beaming palette and superb tower defence is still very much alive, but surrounded by artifice, cynicism and subliminally encouraging the purchase of fabrications, there's a creeping sense that *Plants Versus Zombies 2: It's About Time* cares less about the player, and more the clinking in their coffers.

VERDICT 6/10

BLEMISHED AND WILTING IN THE MIDDAY SUN

Below: As usual you'll kill your fair share of foot soldiers and, as usual, you'll find yourself traipsing back through empty zones when a mission suddenly throws a new objective your way. The disappointing side effect of *Dynasty Warriors*.





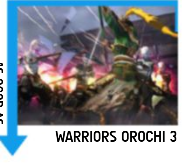
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: July 19
PLAYERS: 1 -2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

BLADESTORM: THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR





WARRIORS OROCHI 3

AS GOOD AS

UNRIVALLED IN THE THREE KINGDOMS? THIS TIME, PERHAPS

Dynasty Warriors 8

How many pages would we need to convince the unworthy that *Dynasty Warriors* isn't actually that bad? Sad as it is to say the series gets a lot of flak these days, so when an new entry comes along and offers enough improvements and tweaks to the formula that it's worthy of praise it is all seemingly for naught. Any valid compliment simply falls on deaf ears.

But that's the case with *Dynasty Warriors 8*; it *does* improve the template, from enhancements to combat or the inclusion of the new – and brilliant – Ambition mode. Most of you will no doubt accept what we're saying, nod slowly and move on: that's fine, *Dynasty Warriors* isn't for everyone and the eighth iteration won't do anything to change that. If, however, you have a soft spot for the comfort food of videogames, then read on.

Combat retains a lot of what makes the franchise so pervasive in that even the most uninitiated can succeed with little more than a repetitive bashing of the buttons. Now, however, there's even more variety in *how* you fight, and while stabbing the face buttons over and over again will get you through to the end, the inclusion of improved mechanics means there's more to it than just that. First off is Affinity, a rock-paper-scissors style of weapon element. Heaven beats Man, Man beats Earth, Earth beats Heaven: it's not necessarily complex – and that's fine – but it does mean there's more strategy in the combat itself. Using the counter element will enable a powerful Storm Rush against an officer, but if they've got the advantage over you then you can use a Switch Counter – basically parrying at the right moment to get the upper-hand over an officer with a stronger elemental type. This is combined with the return of Rage mode – known as Rage Awakening – to craft a combat system that is far more enjoyable and flexible than *Dynasty Warriors*' button-bashing reputation suggests.

This reputation also includes the franchise's well-known penchant for grinding, and that's where Ambition Mode comes in. Juxtaposed to the traditional Story and Free Mode, Ambition might seem like a superfluous add-on, but it's here where a large part of *Dynasty Warriors 8* really shows its, well, *ambition*. Beginning the mode with a single character and a tiny base of operations, your task is simple: create a palace worthy for Emperor Xian to visit. The idea is a gradual improvement of your stead, marrying the grinding nature of *Dynasty Warrior*'s combat to an underlying system that provides just enough compulsion to not feel repetitive.

So while there's no denying that *Dynasty Warriors 8* is still far behind in the graphical department – and in that sense it'll likely never win over newcomers – in terms of improvements to what has come before this is quite easily one of the best *Dynasty Warriors* game for a long time.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

NO GUTS, NO GLORY Ambition Mode will be a big deal for fans of the franchise since it provides a little more reward for a series notorious for its excessive grind. More of this please, Omega Force.





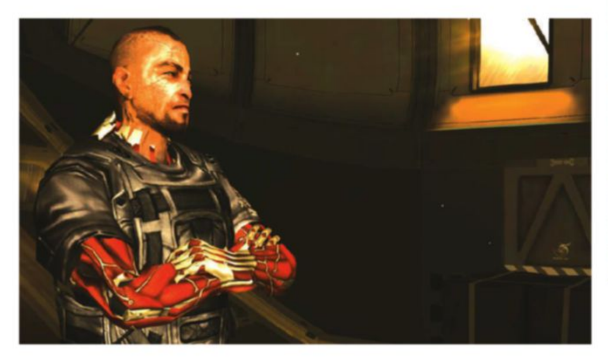


VERDICT 7/10

RELEARN YOUR HATRED FOR LU BU

A TOUCH OF CLASS

Deus Ex: The Fall





Left: Those of you familiar with *Human Revolution* will recognise a lot of the old cast in *The Fall*. Primarily, you're going to be having a number of conversations with its bad guys instead of, you know, shooting their faces off.

Here's the argument: You can't bring a triple-A FPS experience to mobile; you're missing a button. Played as a shooter, that's true here: the touch-screen equivalent of twin-stick move-look is admittedly workable (albeit with the ever-present problem of drift), but without a fire button it's less run-'n-gun, more run-'n-stop-'n-aim-'n-shoot-'n-hope your target hasn't moved before your thumb has found the appropriate icon.

Deus Ex: The Fall suffers in this respect as much as any, but like its older brother, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, it is two games in one. In *Human Revolution*, that was an enjoyable stealth-'em-up and an above average shooter. What *The Fall* achieves is to divide those personalities beyond plain sight of one another. To the point where an absolute can be applied: one works, the other does not.

As a shooter, it does its best with what it has. It tries. You can tap-to-target or auto-target enemies, which provides a window during which to hover your thumb over the fire icon. But with two or more enemies alerted to your presence, you don't have a hope. *Deus Ex: The Fall* nudges, pokes and shouts you into playing stealthily. And you should listen; played this way it's a far, far better game. The slow pace enforced by awkward controls doesn't matter here. Former SAS merc Ben Saxon's struggle to discover the truth behind the global conspiracy which threatens both his life and that of his friends play out one carefully considered approach after the next.

More impressive; every element of *Human Revolution* is present and correct. XP and levelling affords Praxis points, which if you're playing *The Fall* as it should be played, you'll spend on hacking and camouflage abilities. *Human Revolution*'s route choices, which reward you with XP for finding the sneakiest approach, are present and correct, and although visually more on par with a high-res PS2 title than it is more recent console fare, stylistically the world is both impressive and familiar.

There are sidequests in abundance, a dizzying array of weapons and abilities, a well-plotted story whose cutscenes recall many of *Human Revolution*'s original voice cast, and there's choice. The agency afforded us to where we like, when we like and to approach each situation in whichever way we please.

As a straight-up FPS, *Deus Ex: The Fall* is an unequivocal failure. But as a stealth think-'em-up, it's a triumph of good first-person game design on a format that is, historically speaking, stubbornly ill-suited to similar fare.

DETAILS

FORMAT: IOS (IPAD 3RD GENERATION)
OTHER FORMATS: ANDROID
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: N-Fusion
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: WOLFENSTEIN 3D (IOS)

WORSE THAN: DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NO SHOOTY-SHOOTY: If we were N-Fusion, we'd have dropped the pretence that this is even playable as an FPS; that notion only stood up when it had a controller attached. At least that aspect can be ignored.

VERDICT 7/10

PLAY IT FOR STEALTH AND YOU'LL ENJOY IT

Right: Although split up into many more loading zones due to memory constraints the cityscapes of *The Fall* are every bit as atmospheric and nuanced as those in *Human Revolution*.





2013'S SECOND XBLIG BREAKOUT IS A BRUISER

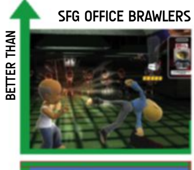
One Finger Death Punch

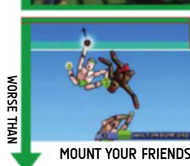
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Silver Dollar Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 80 Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SFG OFFICE BRAWLERS





MOUNT YOUR FRIENDS

WORSE THAN

The Xbox Live Indie Games service may currently be set to dissolve alongside Microsoft's prevailing console hardware, but its talented progeny aren't going down without a fight. Following Daniel Steger's surprise sensation *Mount Your Friends* comes *One Finger Death Punch*, a technically faultless two-button beat-'em-up thats outright greatness is impeded solely by its lack of online leader-boards: a deeply unfortunate XBLIG prerequisite in this case.

It starts gently. Enemies approach from your left and your right. Once they've invaded your (increasingly slight) attack radius you can dispatch them by hitting X or B. Barely ten levels in, and the game begins amping things up in sizeable increments. Some enemies are able to dodge your attacks, demanding a brisk two-button combo. Some require that you input four and five button combinations, while others trigger a lengthy *Guitar Hero*-style note corridor which pops up in the background.

The game's tactical brilliance is cemented by its outright lack of forgiveness: button bashing, as the game repeatedly points out, will kill you almost instantly. But a misjudged button press is only misjudged if there's nobody else onscreen, and manoeuvring around the staggeringly busy later missions is akin to tackling a DragonForce song on *Guitar Hero*, offering up the same frenzied and invigorating clash of luck and skill.

Spanners are joyfully tossed into the mayhem continuously. Weapons – both melee tools and projectiles – totally disrupt the pace of play. The customisable perks add countless layers of additional challenge to every one of its 200+ stages. And the oft-brutal boss encounters command zen-like silence and pause. *One Finger Death Punch* is a considerate package, broad of scope, and utterly riveting in motion, and should be sought out immediately.



VERDICT 9/10
A BRACING FESTIVAL OF BRIGHT IDEAS

Below: Although it's an XBLIG exclusive for the moment, a PC demo recently appeared on the game's Steam Greenlight page. Full gamepad support is offered.







XBOX LIVE ARCADE IS A LITTLE TOO ALIEN FOR THIS SHOOTER

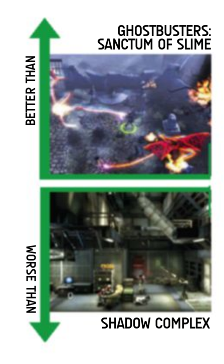
Capsized

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Alientrap Software
PRICE: Out now
RELEASE: 1200 Points
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

GHOSTBUSTERS: SANCTUM OF SLIME



SHADOW COMPLEX

WORSE THAN

Almost immediately upon stepping into *Capsized*'s 2D alien world, you'll discover its biggest flaw. The combat. Originally a PC game, *Capsized* has had to switch the laser precision of a mouse for the point-and-hope ambiguity of the Xbox 360's analogue sticks to make the trip to Live Arcade. It simply can't overcome the dramatic difference between the two – the action in *Capsized* is zoomed out by design, demanding player accuracy in order to survive, and the analogue sticks just aren't up to the task. When you're overwhelmed by enemies, it's a frustrating slog rather than a heroic fight against the odds, as shots harmlessly whizz past the onslaught of aliens.

It's a shame too because there's a captivating atmosphere to *Capsized*, with its beguiling sci-fi soundtrack and eerie touches amongst its background such as alien statues and dead astronauts. It's a physics-based platformer, where your astronaut's gravity hook is used to fling pieces or even himself around to solve puzzles. The main impetus exploration of each level is to discover the secrets that are often visible with no obvious way to reach them. Describing *Capsized* as a Metroidvania style title in this regard is exaggerating but it's still a clear motive for poking and prodding the level design.

There's also a clever emphasis on the leaderboards and achievements to getting through *Capsized* without dying, without firing weapons, while discovering all the secrets and so on. There's a brilliant game here, as proved by its original PC release. It's just a shame the combat side of *Capsized* is hampered by something the developers can do little about.



It has moments of beauty, but the combat of *Capsized* sadly leaves too much to be desired.



VERDICT 6/10
A GREAT GAME ON THE WRONG PLATFORM

THE PELLET GUN IS GONE, AND THE HEAT IS ON

Mighty Switch Force 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Wayforward Technologies
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £5
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — GUNMAN CLIVE

WORSE THAN — MIGHTY SWITCH FORCE

While the original *Mighty Switch Force* was an action platformer first and a smart puzzler second, Wayforward's new sequel makes a calculated effort to do it the other way around. This is a slower and much more pensive experience than its predecessor, and that change of pace is difficult to fully appreciate, primarily because it isn't tied to anything truly innovative. Although hero Patricia Wagon has had her trusty pellet gun revoked in favour of a flame-dousing water cannon, what we have on offer here is largely more of the same. No bad thing.

It's still a game about moving switches and blocks between the background and the foreground – to trap, kill or catapult either yourself or one of your enemies – and it's still an inviting and pleasurable system. A couple of new gameplay mechanics are introduced, but they're used infrequently and never alter the foundations of play too drastically. On occasion some new angular pipe blocks appear, which allow you to redirect your water stream, but they're mainly here just to spice up the combat a little. Those looking for the tightly walled, seat-of-your-pants time-attack buzz of the original may leave a little disappointed: this is more about investigative trial-and-error than anything else, with bigger areas and a far more ruthless set of stringent par times.

This reworked structure is perhaps part of an attempt to deviate attention away from the succinct duration (most people's solitary complaint with the original game) but only the churlish would deny that this milder, drowsier format does actually work. It's just a bit of a shame that there isn't more to differentiate it from its forbear. Entertaining it most certainly is, but Wayforward should really be pushing a little bit harder than this.

Below: Hidden in each of the game's sixteen stages is an "Ugly Secret Baby" which, rather oddly, needs to be kicked offscreen to safety whenever you find it. It's a strange game.





VERDICT 6/10
AN INFERIOR BUT SOLIDLY ENTERTAINING SEQUEL

GREAT FUN, PROVIDING YOU CAN FIND SOMEONE TO PLAY WITH…

Gun Monkeys

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Size Five Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
MIN SPEC: OS: Windows XP, Processor: 500Mhz, Memory: 1GB RAM, DirectX: 9.0c, Hard Drive: 400 MB HD Space
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Quite why so few people are playing *Gun Monkeys* is something of a mystery to us. After all, it features both guns and monkeys, surely a match made in heaven? Spawned from the same fertile mind that delivered *Ben There, Dan That!*, *Privates* and *Time Gentlemen, Please!*, *Gun Monkeys* is a nutty one-on-one shooter that pits you against a similarly armed simian in a never ending supply of neon-soaked procedurally generated levels.

Each player's monkey starts in a power core that slowly drains down from 200 points. Once a player's power core has been reduced to zero, the winning player's leftover points are converted into cash. Said cash can then be used to buy nearly 29 different perks, four of which can be assigned for any match. While decommissioning your opponent's simian will cause them to lose eight precious seconds while their next monkey respawns, it's a slow way to success due to the weakness of your core shooter. A far better way to get the drop on your opponent is to simply collect the energy cubes that routinely appear during each frantic match. You can carry up to three cubes at a time, and when you dump them in your own core they dramatically lower the time left on your opponent's. You'll get far more points for each subsequent cube you pick up, meaning there's a nice layer of risk versus reward for those willing to recklessly go after three at a time.

And that's pretty much it, except we forgot to mention that exotic weaponry randomly drops from the sky – which does everything from callously rip your monkey's arms off so they can't use weapons, to a gigantic nuke – the droll voiceover by comedic actor Kevin Eldon, who routinely and heartlessly mocks monkeys as they die, and the moody music which perfectly matches *Gun Monkey*'s fast-paced gameplay. The server's can take a little while to respond and the controls feel a little too spongy at first, but if you can find a steady stream of people to play against you'll discover *Gun Monkeys* to be tremendous, if rather basic, fun.







Above: Some levels take place underwater, which greatly affects the game's gravity. It slows down the pace considerably, becoming a further tactic that you need to take into consideration while playing.

VERDICT 7/10
BASIC, BUT NUTTY SILLY FUN ALL THE SAME



WHY I ♥...

Flower

MARK CERNY, SONY,
LEAD SYSTEM ARCHITECT

“*I loved* Flower. *I actually went back and played* Flower *again when I finished* Journey*, I loved it because the idea of you living the dream of a flower was just so surreal and so beautiful. The gameplay they built for it had this almost meditative feel to it. I am very proud to be part of an organisation that would support the development of such a game.*”



"Living the dream of a flower was just so surreal"

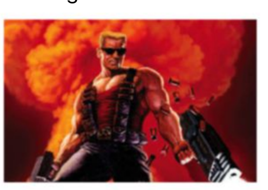
MARK CERNY, SONY

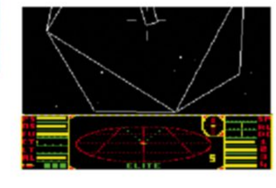
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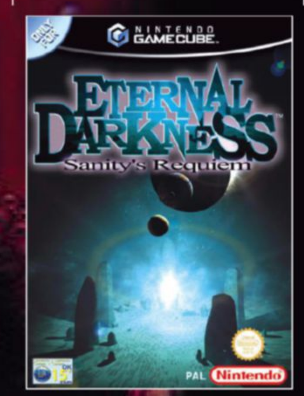




BEHIND THE SCENES

ETERNAL DARKNESS: SANITY'S REQUIEM

One of the GameCube's early cult hits, director Denis Dyack takes us through the making of his well-regarded time-crossing horror adventure



Released: June 2002 (USA), October 2002 (Japan), November 2002 (Europe)
Format: GameCube
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Silicon Knights
Key Staff: Denis Dyack: director, writer, producer
Shigeru Miyamoto: Producer
Composer: Steve Henifin

VIDEOGAME MECHANICS DON'T progress anywhere nearly as quickly as the visuals they power, so storytelling and character evolution are becoming more and more important. *The Last Of Us*, *Heavy Rain* and *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West* are just a few of the more recent games that have tried to blur the boundaries between two very different forms of entertainment, but they certainly weren't the first. 11 years ago, another game was also slowly blazing a trail, a trail that would guide its developers to the forefront of the industry, but eventually see it collapse under its own hubris. The game was *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*; the company, Silicon Knights, and both were formed by Denis Dyack, who recently set up Precursor games after poor sales of Silicon Knights' previous two titles, *Too Human* and *X-Men: Destiny* and a failed lawsuit with Epic Games. This isn't a time for the present however, it's a time for the past, and when we speak to Dyack about his magnum opus we speak to a man who loves *Eternal Darkness* and the art of storytelling as much as he loves his three cats, Gracey, Willie and Owen.

"I'm a big *Babylon 5* fan," reveals Dyack when we ask him about *Eternal Darkness*' origins. "Both Ken [McCulloch] and I who have written all our stories are. I think it was a hallmark series because, for the first time on television, they actually told a story that was continued over the whole year and then they had a story arc that was meant to go five years and that had never been done on TV before. We looked at *Babylon Five* and said 'This is groundbreaking, we love it' and it was more about the storyline and the arcs that happened in the background. There were also a lot of characters, but they were less important than the story. Both Ken and I sort of looked at *Resident Evil*, looked at this whole phenomenon happening at the time with *Babylon 5* and we said 'We should do something like that'. So the idea was to have lots of characters and really tell a story arc that meant something over a long period of time."

PLANS FOR *ETERNAL Darkness* were put into motion, and Dyack and his team began looking for a suitable console. Although Silicon Knights had previously found success on PC and PlayStation thanks to titles such as *Dark Legions* and *Blood Omen: Legacy Of Kain*, Dyack and his team eventually settled on the N64, mainly due to its relationship with Nintendo that had recently begun to blossom. "It was a great system and it did a lot of things at the time that other systems didn't," explains Dyack about the decision to release *Eternal Darkness* on Nintendo's 64-bit console. "We were running at the time in high-res without an extra memory card, which was really rare. I think it was 640 by 480 back then, if you went to that you had to put the extra memory in and it cost a lot more to manufacture. We actually figured out a way to do it without the extra memory, so from that perspective it garnered a lot of attention. At the same time it was a very mature take on storytelling which was very rare at the time in the industry, but also I think it was very different as far as Nintendo's portfolio went."

Work progressed well, but the game began to hit several delays – something that later Silicon Knights games would become infamous for – and development time dragged on as Nintendo began to prepare for its next console. Eventually, development of the game was stopped so *Eternal Darkness* could move to Nintendo's 128-bit GameCube, where it

WE WERE FAIRLY FAR ALONG IN THE PROCESS OF THE N64 VERSION

was initially planned as a launch title. We were keen to know if Dyack was happy about the decision. "It was shortly after the GameCube was announced and we were fairly far along in the process of the N64 version," remembers Dyack. "As a matter of fact I'm sure we were perhaps past Alpha and getting close to Beta, so it was quite a shock to me and to the whole team, but this was a decision that Nintendo made and it had nothing to do with their opinion of the game at all. They really liked the game, but it was a global decision where they said: 'we need to move forward with the GameCube now,

Virtual Insanity *Eternal Darkness'* sanity effects had everyone talking



WHERE'S MY SAVE?

By far the most infamous effect. The save screen comes up and appears to delete everything. You'll swear loudly the first time.



PUMP UP THE VOLUME

There are sound-based sanity effects including one that mutes the action. This one mimics your TV being turned down.



THERE WILL BE BLOOD

As your sanity drops, blood will appear and start trickling down the screen. Creepy and surprisingly effective.



DANCING ON THE CEILING

You'll enter a room to discover that everything is upside down. You'll be able to run around for a while before it all resets.



LAND OF THE GIANTS

Upon entering the room you'll discover that you've shrunk, making you easy target practice for any nearby enemies.



SYSTEM CRASH

Another Sanity effect that makes you think the game has crashed. Interestingly, it represents a PC, telling you to press CTRL + ALT + DEL.



BUZZ OFF

Some of our favourite sanity effects are the subtle ones. This clever moment tricks you into thinking a fly or bug has landed on your TV screen.





Although Lovecraft is an inspiration, so too are movies. This is clearly from *Raiders Of The Lost Ark.*

this is a new set of hardware and this is what we think we should do.' A lot of people were particularly worried if that was the right thing to do, but it was and we could certainly do a lot more with the GameCube hardware. It had a lot more RAM, it had a disk and in the end, I think we'd all agree that it turned out to be without question the right decision."

Dyack speaks highly of Nintendo, and it's clear he has a lot of respect for the company. What's less clear is just how much involvement Nintendo had. Some have said it was a lot, and turn to Silicon Knights' more recent games as proof of this. Dyack, however, remembers a far more nurturing environment, one where Silicon Knights was allowed to create its own vision, with Nintendo giving help and advice when needed. "We worked very closely with Nintendo and some people came down from Nintendo to work with Silicon Knights for quite a while," he reveals. "Miyamoto is really, really good at what he does and works extremely hard. We went through different cameras, what would be best for the game, and I would say that they generally would respect what we were creating and at the same time say: 'what about this idea?; we think this would be better', and we would sit back, think about it, digest it and we would agree as a team whether we wanted to go in one direction or another. There was a team of people from Nintendo who worked with us, and certainly Miyamoto oversaw our project like he oversaw everyone else's project and we collaborated within that hierarchy. If they were unhappy with the project it wouldn't have gone forward."

ETERNAL DARKNESS DID go forward and was eventually released seven months after the GameCube's US launch. The delay wasn't due to

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION Alone In The Dark > Resident Evil > Resident Evil 4



This dark French masterpiece remains one of the first 3D examples of survival horror. It stars Edward Carnby as a detective.



Capcom's epic reinvented survival horror when it arrived in 1996. It will pull off the same trick nine years later with *Resident Evil 4.*




There are two types of cinematics, the best ones are the ones using the in-game engine. The others have aged quite badly.

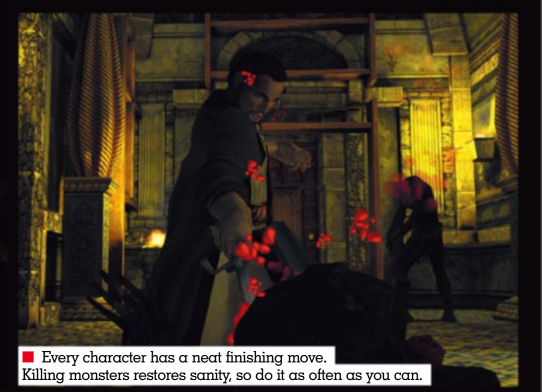
WHAT THEY SAID...



An amazing achievement...a truly intelligent psychological thriller, complete with balanced gameplay and plenty of surprises you'll never forget. 96%
IGN
June, 2002

problems at Silicon Knights, but more due to world events. The tragedy of September 11 in 2001 shocked the world and resulted in several games being delayed, or in the case of Propeller Arena, cancelled outright. Large parts of *Eternal Darkness*' story takes place in the Middle East and several chapters were extensively reworked, meaning *Eternal Darkness* missed its launch window. We were keen to know if the delay was due to painting that part of the world in a specific way, only to be given an emphatic "No" by Dyack, adding "but there was just a lot of stuff going on at the time that just got people nervous, so we did have to change certain things. If we hadn't have had to have done that we would have made launch on the GameCube. We were tracking extremely well but we had to change some chapters and it's just one of those things that happens. It's totally out of your control."

One thing that wasn't out of Silicon Knights' control was the epic story of *Eternal Darkness*, a story that spans time and space and has plenty of connections with the work of H.P. Lovecraft. *Eternal Darkness* begins with a story that takes place in 26 BC and ends over 2,000 years later in the year 2000 AD. It tells the story of a young girl who is investigating the mysterious cause of her grandfather's death. As she continues to explore his huge mansion – cleverly presented as a gaming hub – she uncovers a book called the *Tome Of Eternal Darkness*, the chapters of which acts as levels for the 12 characters you control throughout the game's duration. Alex soon uncovers a plot by Pious Augustus, a fallen Roman Centurion, to awaken an ancient evil that will enslave and devour the world, not unlike the creations described in Lovecraft's own macabre stories. "What I particularly like about Lovecraft in general is that Lovecraft didn't say that these monsters were magical he just said they were extremely advanced and ancient," continues Dyack when we quizzed him about the obvious similarities. "We're like bugs to them, we really don't affect their world in any way, but at the same time they have their own limits and they're trying to come into our dimension, but they really can't. Lovecraft was so strong in that area. Look at *Babylon 5* – [which is] quite frankly, ancient beings that have been around a long time, and mankind stumbles into them. We're in space, but it's still the same themes. It's that type of recurring idea, which I think is the stuff that's worth telling."


Every character has a neat finishing move. Killing monsters restores sanity, so do it as often as you can.

If you have *stuff* that's worth telling you need a way to convincingly convey it. Silicon Knights did it by allowing you to control 12 characters, ranging from Pious Augustus, the man who puts the story's events into motion, to a Persian swordsman named Karim, and a Franciscan monk who uncovers an insidious plot at the cathedral he visits. Each character not only handles completely differently, but also has his or her strengths and weaknesses. Roberto Bianchi is a portly Venetian artist with a lumbering gait and low health, while firefighter Michael Edwards can shrug off most enemy attacks thanks to his great stamina and access to advanced weapons. "If you're going to tell a story you want some pivotal events that you think are significant in human history, which is what we did," explains Dyack. "From that point it just becomes a case of creating fiction around this point of historical accuracy. So we went around and chose spots that we thought were unique and interesting and gave us a perspective that wasn't just North American centric. The whole Lovecraftian overtones with the universe that we had created, that part was obviously fiction, but a lot of the stuff that we did was as close to history as we could research. We looked for interesting locations, interesting time periods and went from there."

A LOT OF THE STUFF WE DID WAS AS CLOSE TO HISTORY AS WE COULD RESEARCH

While controlling so many different characters did set *Eternal Darkness* apart from its peers, it also caused technical problems, mainly because so many different weapons were shoehorned into a single set of combat mechanics. It meant that the controls and fighting could occasionally feel clunky, which


Shadow Of The Eternals is a spiritual sequel being made at Dyack's new company, Precursor Games. It's unclear if it will ever get made.

could cause frustration at certain points. "It was very hard actually and I think you've exactly pin-pointed some of the challenges we faced" agrees Dyack about the combat system used. "If you do something completely different every time, the player is going to get really frustrated because they have to learn something new. It's kind of like when you're playing a game and lose all your weapons and have to start over. I hate that feeling personally. We wanted to make it consistent where you use the same techniques as a player, but as an overall metagame it feels like they're accelerating and learning new stuff and then at the same time you want to introduce different experiences. It's always a challenge."

NO MATTER HOW challenging *Eternal Darkness*' gameplay may have been at times, it certainly couldn't compare with the sheer horror you received as a player when the avatar you had been controlling for the past 30 odd minutes usually died, often in very brutal circumstances. It felt revolutionary at the time, and while it could aggravate, it also told you in no uncertain terms that this was Silicon Knights' story and you were just participating in it, lucky to be along for the ride. It works exceptionally well and still makes *Eternal Darkness* stand apart from many newer games. "Let's face it, even in a lot of popular culture it's not done that much," continues Dyack. "I think for example *Game Of Thrones* does that now. When you're trying to entertain somebody you really want an emotional catharsis. [A moment] that sticks out in my mind is when you're playing Paul Luther. You know that there's a boss fight coming. You see that greater guardian and you're like: 'OK this is going to be an awesome boss fight', and then you look up and you're squashed like a bug. And it's over. I remember when we did focus testing on that people were just like: 'Wow'. They were really upset and there was a concern whether that was the right thing to do. I think it is. From a standpoint of real life, sometimes the good guys lose. Life is not always fair, and I think from that standpoint *Eternal Darkness* really stands out as something that made a statement in that area."

Another area where *Eternal Darkness* stood out was with its brilliant insanity effects. As characters succumb to various atrocities, they slowly lose their grip on reality, and the player begins hallucinating. Initially you'll just witness blood running down your TV screen, or your TV's volume seemingly getting lower, but as the adventure progresses, things get more and more severe, with one of the best emulating your memory card being erased. It's a terrifying moment the first time it happens and amazingly, it's never been attempted since. Unsurprisingly the whole mechanic came from Dyack and his team wanting to do something a little different to the norm. "It was another chance for us to play with the genre," admits Dyack. "With this type of structure you could do it at multiple levels. You could break the fourth wall. It was something that I found very interesting and there were a lot of challenges with that stuff. It wasn't something that was so easily done at the time, that was for sure."

FROM A STANDPOINT OF REAL LIFE, SOMETIMES THE GOOD GUYS LOSE

And that was the real beauty of *Eternal Darkness*. It wasn't a perfect game, not by a long shot, but it was certainly an ambitious one, often going out of its way to give players a unique interesting gaming experience that similar games of the time (including the excellent *Resident Evil* remake) simply weren't offering. It's one of the best early examples of marrying videogames to the cinematic narratives that are starting to become so popular and it marks a highpoint for Silicon Knights, which it never quite replicated. For those that were lucky enough to play the game, it remains the very definition of a flawed masterpiece.



WHAT THEY SAID…

You need this game. Eternal Darkness takes adventuring and horror to levels that Tomb Raider and Resident Evil will never reach. 9.5/10
Cube Magazine, June 2002

HEROES THROUGH TIME

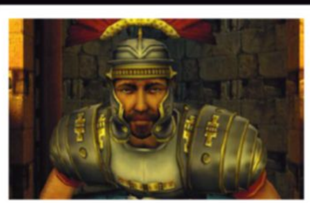
The main characters of *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*



ALEXANDRA ROIVAS

Voice by: **Jennifer Hale**
Year: **2000 AD**
Occupation: **Student**

■ Alex is a young girl who is summoned to Rhode Island after her Grandfather's gruesome death. She navigates the hub-like mansion looking for clues to his murder.



PIOUS AUGUSTUS

Voiced by: **Richard Doyle**
Year: **26 BC**
Occupation: **Centurion**

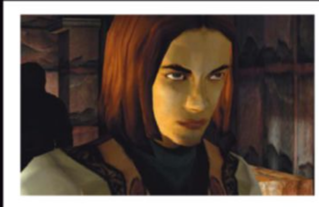
■ The man who kick-starts the events. Pious is a proud warrior but he's soon led astray by the ancients and becomes incredibly powerful with his own dark agenda.



ELLIA

Voiced by: **Kim Mai Guest**
Year: **1150 AD**
Occupation: **Court Dancer**

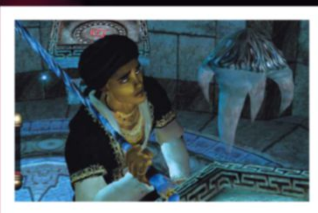
■ A young slave girl who craves adventure. She soon finds it after becoming locked in an ancient temple and stumbling across Pious' evil plan. The first of many bearers of Mantorok's essence.



ANTHONY

Voiced by: **Cam Clarke**
Year: **814 AD**
Occupation: **Frankish messenger**

■ Poor old Anthony doesn't have much luck. Although he uncovers a plot to kill the Charlemagne, he becomes cursed, getting more withered as his investigation continues.



KARIM

Voiced by: **Rino Romano**
Year: **565 AD**
Occupation: **Swordsman**

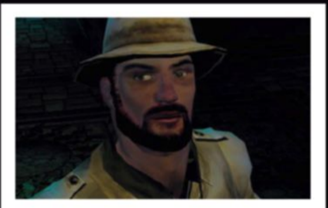
■ Karim attempts to retrieve a treasure for his beloved Chandra, but she betrays him. When he meets her ghost many years later he nobly sacrifices himself to watch over the artifact.



DR MAXIMILLIAN ROIVAS

Voiced by: **William Hootkins**
Year: **1760 AD**
Occupation: **Doctor**

■ After inheriting his dad's mansion, he realises it has a secret. Discovering it's built on an ancient underground city, he's proclaimed mad and locked away.



DR EDWIN LINDSEY

Voiced by: Neil Ross
Year: 1983
Occupation: Archaeologist

■ Possibly based on Indiana Jones, Edwin Lindsey is tricked by Pious Augustus when exploring some Cambodian ruins. He escapes and discovers the remains of Ellia.



PAUL LUTHER

Voiced by: **Paul Eiding**
Year: **1485 AD**
Occupation: **Franciscan monk**

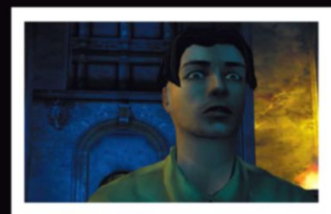
■ After visiting an old cathedral to see the famous Hand Of Jude, Paul is accused of murder. After being freed, Paul discovers an ancient relic but is killed by its protector.



ROBERTO BIANCHI

Voiced by: **Phil Proctor**
Year: **1460 AD**
Occupation: **Artist/architect**

■ Hailing from Venice, Roberto is taken prisoner and forced to survey an ancient temple. He encounters the spirit of Karim who passes the artifact of Mantorok to him.



PETER JACOB

Voiced by: **Michael Bell**
Year: **1916**
Occupation: **Field reporter**

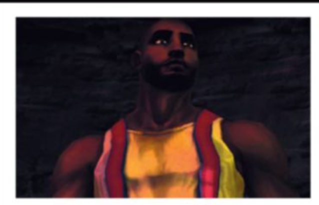
■ Peter is investigating disappearances at the very cathedral (now a field hospital) that Paul Luther died in. He successfully defeats the guardian and hands the artifact to Edward Roivas.



EDWARD ROIVAS

Voiced by: **Neil Dickson**
Year: **1952**
Occupation: **Clinical psychologist**

■ Edward discovers the tome of darkness. Despite facing deadly odds he's able to destroy it, killing everything there. He's by a guardian, which sparks the game.



MICHAEL EDWARDS

Voiced by: **Greg Eagles**
Year: **1991**
Occupation: **Firefighter**

■ Michael Edwards is a firefighter during the Gulf War, but gets trapped in the Forbidden City when an explosion leaves him there by himself.



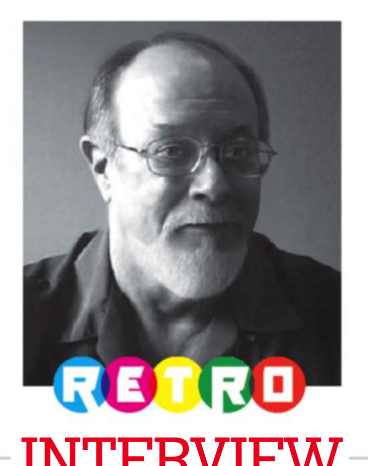
BEST BOSS

SUPER SMASH BROS. NINTENDO 64 [Nintendo] **1999**

■ Mario, Link, Kirby and Samus thrown into the arena to duke it out over… what exactly? Don't look for reason or rhyme in the curious concept of Sakurai's *Smash Bros.* series, because it's simply not there. To epitomise all the unrelenting nonsense, HAL Labs saw fit to add an ominous giant glove as the final enemy, who drifts into the arena at the conclusion of the arcade trial. The most interesting aspect of the Master Hand's appearance is how it subverts the rules of *Smash Bros.* up to that point, tasking the player to gradually chip away its HP as it unleashes a volley of screen-consuming attacks – each derived from various villains from Nintendo's heritage. But, let's be honest, it's rather anticlimactic after surviving the gamut of legendary fighters up until that point. But it's the very fact that it's such a bizarre inclusion is the very reason why it remains so memorable. We don't know why you exist, Master Hand, but we're sure glad you do.


1P
300H.P







INTERVIEW

STEPHEN HORNBACK

The artist behind the Duke Nukem series talks about his passion for art, joining Apogee, his legendary work on the classic franchise, his sudden departure from the company and proof that there is life after Duke

Behind every classic game there are many creators that help to bring an idea to reality. Usually, unless someone is a figurehead of a company, they often go unknown and unappreciated for their efforts. However, when it comes to the *Duke Nukem* franchise, a series that is best remembered for its slick, gritty and impressive visuals, the name Stephen A Hornback should be ringing in your ears. Originating from a small town in southern Ohio that focused on the steel industry, Stephen's love for art started at an early age. In fact, his bio on his website proudly proclaims, "My passion and my life is art." Through interviewing Stephen, this quickly becomes apparent. His passion hits home when he not only speaks of the old days, but also when he mentions his latest artistic endeavours. *Duke Nukem*'s unsung hero sits down with us to discuss his lengthy career, one that has had its fair share of ups and downs.

First off, could you give us a little background about yourself?

I'm originally from a small town in the American midwest, southern Ohio to be exact. Steel was the town's livelihood, though my father ran an office supply store. This gave me access to art supplies, so I dabbled in art a bit. When I was in high school, I had to decide to pursue art or science. I couldn't imagine making a living back then as a starving artist, so I picked the sciences, but I maintained art as a hobby.

I went to college, but ran short of funds. So I worked for many years in industrial jobs and, after completing my degree, as an engineer for Westinghouse. During that time I finally got a chance to work on games.

How would you describe your art style and how you approach your work?

I love making things as immersive for the player as possible. My style is often more realistic than fantasy as I want the players to feel like they are in a real place. I've always worked hard to create a cohesive environment for any game I've worked on.

How did you come about landing your role at Apogee?

While an engineer at Westinghouse, I had gotten my first computer and was looking for inexpensive software for it. Someone showed me a catalogue with something called 'shareware'. As I glanced through it, I saw some rough clip art graphics (some were pretty bad too!). Well, I had already been playing around with drawing some digital pictures which I felt were better than the art in the catalogue, so I sent them off to that shareware company for possible inclusion in their catalogue.

They not only got in the catalogue, but won second place in a shareware submission contest they were sponsoring. I was beaten by a game – *Duke Nukem*. Well,

I LOVE MAKING THINGS IMMERSIVE FOR THE PLAYER… I WANT THEM TO FEEL LIKE THEY ARE IN A REAL PLACE



DEVELOPER COMMENTS

" ■■■ Stephen's 3D modelling techniques and artwork are what made *Duke 3D* (and *Shadow Warrior*) such an immersive gaming experience. I'll never forget the thrill of feeling as if I was in the game, a real part of it… especially during *Duke* matches online with my brother. The hair on the back of my neck would stand up every time I played. I believe this was mostly due to the realism of the atmosphere created by artists such as Stephen. His contributions to *Duke Nukem 3D* can not be overlooked when you discuss the success of that game. "

JON ST JOHN (VOICE OF DUKE FROM DUKE NUKEM 3D ONWARDS) ON STEPHEN A HORNBACK



While rather useless against smaller, quicker enemies, the RPG is best kept for boss battles.

apparently, Scott Miller at Apogee had been checking the results of that contest. They needed an artist for their next game, and he saw that I'd gotten second place to *Duke*. So one night (believe it or not I was playing *Commander Keen* at the time) the phone rang, and Scott asked if I'd be interested in working on their next (then unnamed) game. I agreed, of course; and spent my days at Westinghouse and my night's working on the game at home. I was even lucky enough to name it: *Cosmo's Cosmic Adventure*.

Duke Nukem 2 arguably defined the look of future titles. Give us an idea on how you approached your work on it.

Well, I did create the *Duke 2* character, but George Broussard touched up the head to make his face a little leaner/meaner. Duke looked great. Back then we used a program called Deluxe Paint and Deluxe Animation. I was still stuck with only 16 colours for *Duke 2* as well. The overall look was often inspired by movies of the time; sci-fi thrillers like *Total Recall* come to mind.

Early on in development, _Rise Of The Triad_ was actually being created as a sequel to _Wolfenstein 3D_. Tell us about the original plan for the sequel to _Wolfenstein 3D_.

Rise Of The Triad was supposed to be the sequel. To my knowledge, though, it was to have been more of the same stuff that was in the original with a Tom Hall twist. But things changed when I was told that someone insulted id during a meeting, and with *Doom* coming out id cancelled the project. The engine was then rewritten, and the game changed to *Rise Of The Triad*. In our game we had the ability to look up and down; *Doom* didn't. So the programmers went over to id, told them about it, and that's why you can look up and down in *Doom*.

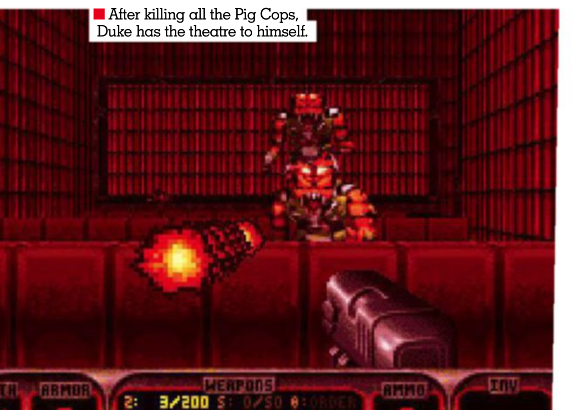
Just to highlight how archaic things were back then, Tom and the programmers made a decision to get the animations by building a giant turntable (artists were looked down on and almost never consulted about anything then). On the turntable were mounted costumed Apogee employees who were posed in an action position, and then filmed while spun around in 45 degree increments. It was my job then to cut out and touch up each image. We had to almost double the number of characters that would have ended up in the game, but due to floppy disk restrictions about half were cut. This mistake probably wasted about six months of my work.

Tell us about how you approached creating the 3D Realms logo.

Shortly after *Rise Of The Triad* was completed, Scott Miller and George came into my office, saying they needed a new logo right away. When I got home that evening, I sat on my sofa sketching concept after concept. Eventually I designed a version not too dissimilar from what became the final logo. The idea was simply to get the letters 3D and rotate the 3 and D to emphasise the 3D aspect. The next day it was finished, and when George came in he said, "Looks like we got a keeper".

Many gamers see _Duke Nukem 3D_ as the pinnacle of the series. Give us an impression of the attitude and feeling inside 3D Realms.

With *Duke 3D*, everything seemed to go right. Apogee/3D Realms had hired a good director. I was highly motivated, as I was told that I was to receive three per cent royalty. So yes, we had an extremely talented group of individuals, everyone was working very



After killing all the Pig Cops, Duke has the theatre to himself.

DEVELOPER COMMENTS



"*Duke Nukem 3D* caused quite a lot of controversy upon release. While some of this was aimed at actual scenes within the game, others, such as the claim by Media Watch that the player gets points "for the murder of these mostly prostituted and partially nude women" were completely unfounded. In fact, the game actually punished the player for such actions by spawning more enemies. Regardless, to avoid an outright ban in various countries, a censored version of *Duke Nukem 3D* was issued. In response to its controversial material, Stephen A Hornback says, "His tough-guy image set him apart, and it was pushed especially hard by George Broussard to make sure the game received a rating that depicted it as the most offensive game possible. This would maximise sales. I personally liked some of it and disliked some of it. I know there were many arguments about how far to take it, but it seems with *Duke 3D* it was taken just far enough but not too far.""

DUKE NUKEM 3D CONTROVERSY, QUOTE FROM STEPHEN A. HORNBACK

hard, and we were trying to make the game as fun as possible.

But after the project was completed, things changed. I was told my royalty would not be three per cent, but only one per cent. Not only was it a slap in the face, but to me that was the same as them stealing money right out of my pocket. Greg Malone left the company, and several talented programmers, an artist, and a level designer left to start Ritual Entertainment. Chuck Jones left to go work for Valve because he was unhappy with the way he was being treated. He wasn't even invited to E3 when *Duke 3D* was finished, and I remember how bad he felt about being left out of that. A lot of wonderful talent left then, and 3D Realms was never the same.

Why did you leave Apogee/3D Realms?
When the in-house development of *Prey* was cancelled, I wasn't given much work for *DNF*, but I tried to get as involved as I was being allowed. Artist/level designer bonds had already been established, and I felt a bit like an outsider. Then I experienced a medical problem. While mowing the lawn, I suffered a major heart attack in April 2000. I worked hard to recover and get back to work as quickly as possible. Upon returning a short time later, my contract was terminated a few weeks after my return.

I was called into George B's office, and the three higher-ups were there. I was told by Scott Miller that I was being laid off. Steven Blackburn (office manager) said "It's not like we're going to replace you or anything." George B made some comment like my art wasn't good enough for 3D Realms. Anyway, that was that. A short time later I was interviewed by Rogue Entertainment, who was making *American McGee's Alice*. When asked why I left 3D Realms, I told them what Miller and Blackburn had said; and I was immediately informed by one of the interviewers that 3D Realms was indeed seeking a new artist! It didn't matter because Rogue hired me anyway. That was really a great place to work! Another sad end to that story was that my termination contract specified that Apogee Software Ltd (aka 3D Realms) was to pay me a certain amount of money when *Duke Nukem Forever* reached certain milestones. Several of these milestones have already been reached, but they have informed me that they will do nothing to honour these obligations. I tried negotiating, but to no avail. I certainly do not wish to take legal action against them, but they leave a person little choice.



After Stephen's sudden departure from Apogee, he found a new home with Rogue Entertainment, creators of *American McGee's Alice* in 2000.



EVERYTHING SEEMED TO GO RIGHT [WITH DUKE 3D]…WE HAD AN EXTREMELY TALENTED GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS

In 2000 you worked on *American McGee's Alice*, a vast departure in terms of design from previous titles you were a part of. How did you approach this dark psychological horror?
It was a fabulous experience. A great group of very talented developers, awesome managers and a delightful working environment made this one of the best times I ever had making a game. The idea was brilliant, and I was happy to lend a hand wherever I could. It was great to be back in creative production again. I was very happy with how the project turned out. It was sad, though, when EA decided not to move forward with the PS2 version of the game, and Rogue went out of business soon after. Many of the development team went on to form Nerve Software. I often wish I'd gone with them.

You're currently one of the owners of Soldak Entertainment. What do you think they offer in terms of new game experiences?
Steven Peeler, Soldak's president, is an absolutely brilliant game designer. I was honoured when Steven asked me to join the company full time as an owner. Soldak states its goal is focused on bringing new and unique gameplay to the entertainment industry. With real-time interactive worlds, our games provide a player with a new and different experience with every game. I got sick of testing *Duke 3D* because it was the same thing every play-through. But I never tired of testing *Din's Curse* because every game is different. I know that gamers will always get their money's worth when buying a Soldak game. Another great thing about Soldak is that they actually listen to their fans and take their comments/suggestions/criticisms to heart. That way we can make games for gamers.

Have any last words for our readers?
Buy Soldak's latest title *Drox Operative* so I can eat something other than beans on toast!



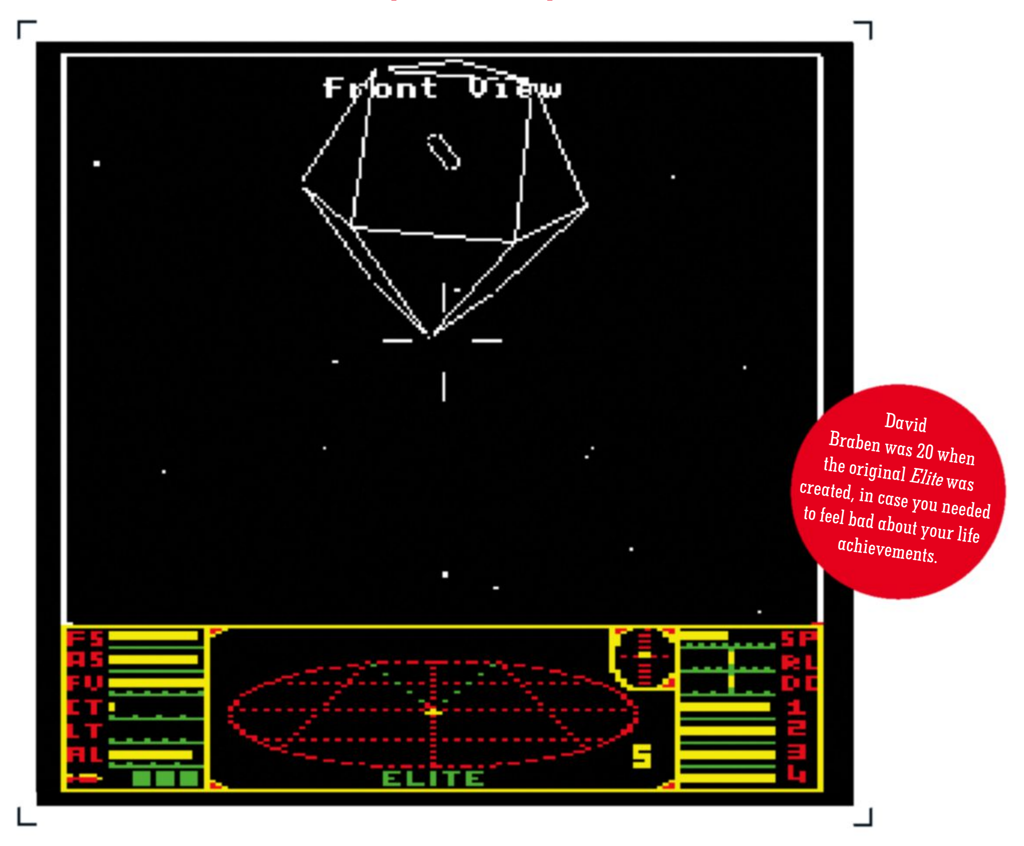
Designed by Chuck Jones, the Octabrain – alongside the Pig Cops – remains one of Duke Nukem's most recognisable foes.



GAME CHANGERS

ELITE

Released: 1984 **Developer:** Acornsoft **System:** BBC Micro



David Braben was 20 when the original *Elite* was created, in case you needed to feel bad about your life achievements.

Every month **games™** looks back at some of the most influential and groundbreaking games of all time. This month we look at how David Braben and Ian Bell steered gamers into a revolutionary open sandbox 3D world

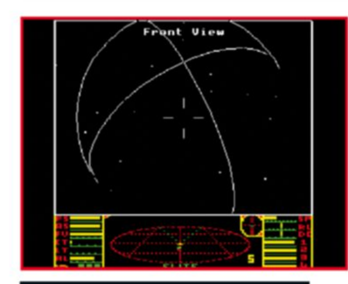
IN THE EARLY days of computing, the vast majority of games were small in scope and rather casual. Whether they involved trying to score more points than an opponent in a game of virtual ping-pong or moving a character across platforms in a linear title with three lives they, in some sense, restricted the player by asking for prescribed tasks to be performed.

Elite changed the way games were perceived by opening up the game world, leaving players to largely get on with the task in hand and not giving them a time limit. Where some games could be over and done with in 20 minutes, *Elite* could swallow up an entire afternoon, eat into an evening and cause a few missed hours of sleep too. The space trading game, *Elite*, set a new standard, and it would prove to be influential for decades to come.

The game was the product of a collaboration between university friends David Braben and Ian Bell. Braben loved physics and astronomy. Indeed, one of the first programs he wrote on a computer was an expanding star field, and he really wanted to fly through it. The BASIC program wasn't fast enough, however, so he learned machine code on his Acorn Atom and created some 3D graphics, including third-dimension spaceships. Bell, meanwhile, was busy coding a game for Acornsoft called *Free Fall*. *Elite* was born when Braben asked Bell if he could help turn his graphics into a game, and the pair spent ages figuring out just how it could be done.

Starting on the planet Lave, the gamer took control of a Cobra Mk III spacecraft. 100 credits ensured that fuel and cargo could be bought, albeit a meagre amount. Players could use the spaceship to make

ELITE: KEY ELEMENTS | FOUR REASONS WHY ELITE STOOD OUT IN 1984



RIGHT PLACE + TIME

★ The games industry was in its infancy, and *Elite*, as the first space trading game, was able to rip up the rules that previous games had laid down. That included the score, three lives rule and time limits that were demanded by publishers at the time.



IT WAS OPEN WORLD

★ Space is as sandbox-like as you could get, and Bell and Braben realised this. By providing the spacecraft, asteroids, planets and stars, players were able to fill in their own story. Whether firing lasers or exploring, gamers made their own experience.



HUGE AMBITION

★ Gamers received a weighty list of instructions, and often had trouble getting started. Docking on a planet was hard too, but then aligning ships and matching rotation rates is never easy. It was released on 25 devices – the most of any space trading game ever.



FIRST TRUE 3D GAME

★ *Defender* and *Galaxians*, for example, were 2D space games and in 1984, 3D wasn't seen as possible. But the wireframe 3D graphics changed the way people looked at games and it changed the way they could be played. It was unlike any experience preceding it.

more money by trading goods. Not only would this make a healthy profit, but it would provide the means to enhance the spaceship. But at first players had to tread carefully, for only by being financially prudent would they be able to get more money and cargo with which to trade, mastering the art of flying so that they could swiftly get to a suitable destination of their own choosing and offload their wares.

■■■ EXPERIENCE AND COLD hard cash would ease the path to success and help a gamer climb from harmless to poor; average to above average; competent to dangerous and finally deadly to elite. How this was achieved was entirely up to the player, this freedom made possible by an advanced game engine that was achieved using just 22k of code.

It was a masterpiece of programming. Although Braben and Bell have said they were merely doing the best they could on the BBC Micro, they didn't let commercial considerations compromise what they thought would be a really good game. For them, it was about showcasing what a game could achieve and producing a title that they would want to play themselves using realistic physics – for its day at least. However, Thorn EMI infamously turned it down because it did not fit into the predetermined vision the company had of games. That in itself showed that *Elite* was something extraordinary.

FOR THEM, IT WAS ABOUT SHOWCASING WHAT A GAME COULD ACHIEVE

KEY FACTS

■ *Elite* was the first ever game to use procedural generation. This is when content is generated algorithmically. *Elite* was planned to have 282 trillion galaxies, but that was ultimately reduced to eight.

■ Robert Holdstock wrote a novella which was bundled with the game. Called *The Dark Wheel*, it told of Rock Hermits who mined asteroids.

■ Bell and Braben fell out in 2000 when Bell released *Elite* into the public domain. The pair, however, appeared to put their differences aside when they spoke at GameCity in Nottingham in 2009.

Whether or not Braben and Bell would have chosen a non-space theme had they more memory to play with is irrelevant. For here the wireframe 3D graphics with hidden line removal proved outstanding in an era still getting to grips with advancing 2D visuals. Fuel pods and salvage pods would make for a better ship and ease navigation and collecting. Extra missiles and beam lasers could be purchased and players could make great use of the galactic hyperdrive. It mimicked real life in that sense – the feeling being that the better players became, the more financially rewarding it would be.

At times it would feel lonely – just a gamer flying through a black atmosphere. Then all hell would break loose and players would need to be completely alert, mashing the keys as palms became sweaty and eyes popped, daring not to blink as attempts were made to get to that destination, be it a world, asteroid or fellow spacecraft.

Along the way there were pirates to blow out of the sky, items to steal and goods to trade. *Elite* was complex stuff and tried to be as realistic as possible. Different worlds yielded their own positives: an agricultural world would have basic machinery, spare parts, food and raw materials unless they were well off, in which case they would be more advanced. Industrial worlds would need these raw materials and food. They would want the higher tech machinery as well as medicines and beds.

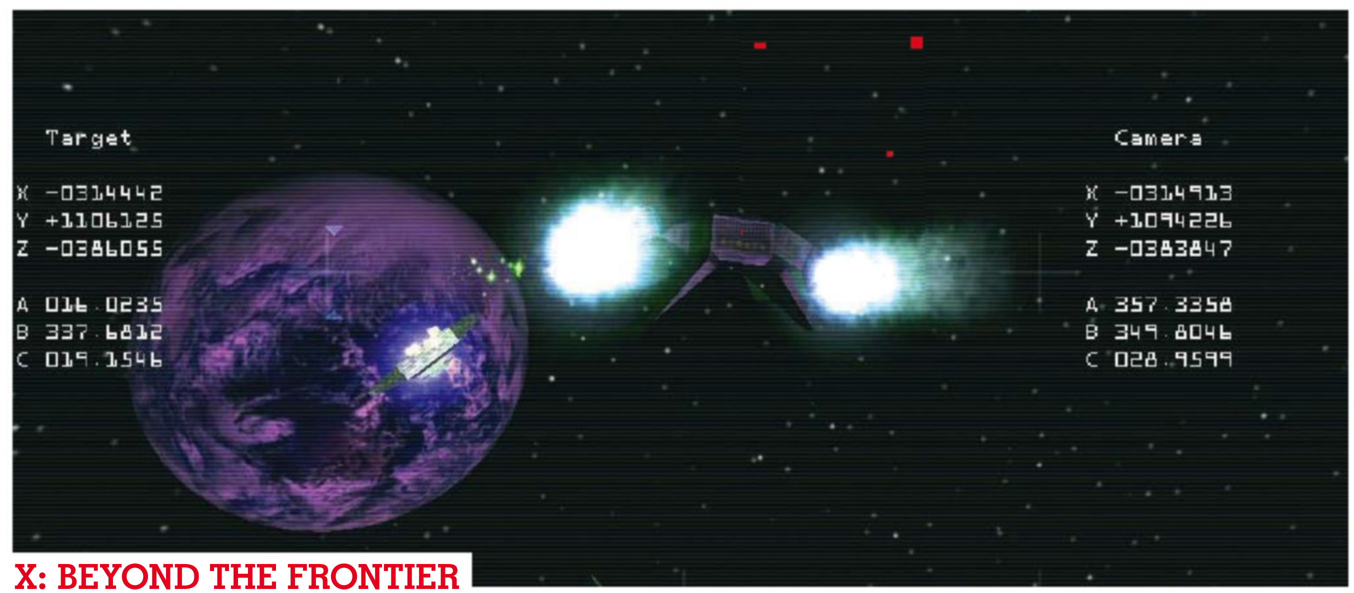
In some ways it was political too. Slaves, narcotics and firearms could be traded – and these black market items fetched a decent price even if they did put your legal status in doubt. But it all helped to redefine how a game should be, and it is perhaps why 25,681 Kickstarter backers pledged £1,578,316 to fund a sequel, *Elite: Dangerous*. They know a game-changer when they see one.



GAME CHANGERS

GAMES INSPIRED BY ELITE

AS IF TO PROVE JUST HOW GAME-CHANGING ELITE REALLY WAS, WE LOOK AT NINE GAMES THAT HAVE TAKEN THEIR INSPIRATION FROM THE 1984 CLASSIC



X: BEYOND THE FRONTIER

■ QUITE APART FROM having the word 'frontier' in the title (David Braben went on to head up Frontier Developments), this game was linked to *Elite* as soon as reviewers and players got their hands on it. It wasn't as ambitious in its approach as *Elite* (there is no novella for a start), but the feeling of not really knowing what was going on added to the sense of adventure. There are lots of base-to-base travel with credits built up to benefit the health and expansion abilities of the ship, and more than enough aliens to try and halt the player in their tracks.



EVE ONLINE

■ ACCORDING TO THE senior producer on the *EVE* project, Nathan Richardson, the endless expanse of space which was ready and waiting in *EVE Online* was very much influenced by *Elite*. In adding social interaction and establishing *EVE Online* as an MMO that allowed players to shape the game to suit themselves, it was so successful that questions have even been asked of Braben's forthcoming game *Elite: Dangerous*, with some suggesting the new title may perhaps amount to an unneeded reboot of *EVE Online*.



WING COMMANDER: PRIVATEER

■ ALTHOUGH IT BEARS the *Wing Commander* name, *Privateer* does not place the gamer in the Terran-Kilrathi conflict. Instead, players assume the role of a freelance space pilot, able to roam the universe in a similar style to *Elite*, albeit in a more linear manner. In looking for work, the player becomes a privateer, collecting bounties and shipping cargo. With the opportunity to buy bigger and better ships, there are clear parallels to *Elite*, especially since the ships have various enhanced abilities.



VEGA STRIKE

■ AS A SPACE trading game that builds on the achievements of *Elite* and *Wing Commander: Privateer*, *Vega Strike* takes some getting used to. Just like with *Elite*, the complex nature of the game and the bid to make money and buy even better ships is at the heart of *Vega Strike*. There are lots of factions to keep happy as you merrily trade away in a dynamic economy, and the open nature of the game stands out, with the player making all of the decisions regarding the course of action to take.



INFINITY (MMOG)

■ YET TO BE released, *Infinity*'s developers are nevertheless so aware of a game with a history touching on 30 years that they are unashamed to take the gameplay from *Elite* as its inspiration. Trading and exploration will be fundamental to this MMOG with fighting taking more of a back seat if the player so wishes it – a departure from how it was used in *Elite*. More important is character development and enriching the player, offering the choice of taking either a peaceful or violent path to success.



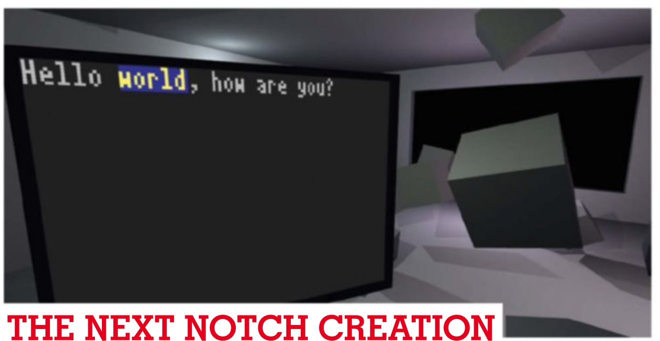
GRAND THEFT AUTO III

■ SAM HOUSER, ONE half of the modern *Grand Theft Auto* brain, was a huge fan of *Elite*. Since *GTA* became a sandbox game of exploration with a story that involved trying to become better, more influential and wealthy, there is little doubting the inspiration *Elite* has had on one of the most popular franchises in videogaming history. *GTA3* took much of what had happened before and welded it with contemporary culture so that the end result was a fresh, mission-based game that set the rules for the new sandbox genre.



ESCAPE VELOCITY

■ BRINGING IN A role-playing element, *Escape Velocity* was a 1996 game that showed a spacecraft from a third-person overhead perspective and involved combat and trade in the same vein as *Elite*, albeit on the more advanced Apple Mac. There were mercenary elements and lots of piracy to engage in and tackle, but there was also a chance to configure the game with plug-ins designed by players which took that do-what-you-like approach of *Elite* to a new and different level.



THE NEXT NOTCH CREATION

■ NOT CONTENT WITH resting on his *Minecraft* laurels, in 2012 Notch said he wanted to create an *Elite*-style space adventure game. He originally said that he wanted it to be like *Elite* "except done right," before adding that he wasn't insinuating *Elite* hadn't been done right. Whether it will be released any time soon remains to be seen, but the it shows that *Elite* inspires everyone – even those who, like Notch with one of the biggest games on the planet under his belt, have already been successful.



FREELANCER

■ AS THE NAME suggests, players are on their own here, foraging in the dankness of space. The open-ended universe within the game allows Edison Trent to explore and become whoever he wants to be which, again, takes a cue from *Elite*'s vision. It is possible to become a trader, thug, hero or pretty much anything in between, and is all down to the way the gamer acts and how others respond to those actions. There's also a multiplayer mode for up to 128 players, further expanding the possibilities.

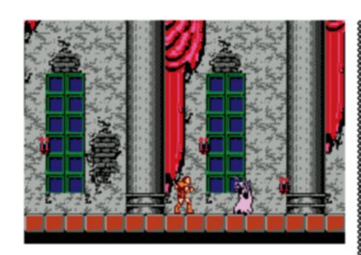
THE RETRO GUIDE TO...



As *Castlevania* hurtles towards the ripe old age of 30, games™ takes a look back over its blood-soaked heritage

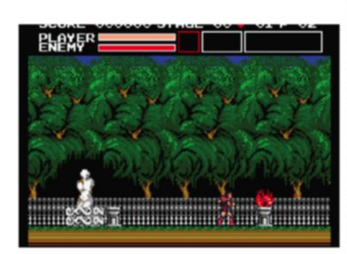
KONAMI'S *CASTLEVANIA* SERIES is undergoing something of a resurgence in popularity of late, thanks to MercurySteam's critically acclaimed and commercially successful *Lords Of Shadow* entries. However, videogame veterans will be aware that the bloody history of this vampire-slaying franchise stretches back almost thirty years, right the way back to Nintendo's 8-bit hardware. Since the original *Castlevania* – known as *Akumajo Dracula* in its native Japan, which translates as *Devil's Castle Dracula* – hit the Nintendo Famicom Disk System in 1986, we've seen instalments on a whole host of popular platforms, including the Mega Drive, N64, PlayStation and – more recently – the iPhone. The Belmont clan's eternal war against The Prince of Darkness has featured its fair share of twists and turns over the years, with some instalments becoming genre classics while others fall painfully short of the expected quality. Despite this, *Castlevania* boasts one of the most packed lineages in videogaming history, and its penchant for moody settings, whip-cracking action and brilliant music has secured it a legion of devoted fans. Over the next few pages we'll chart the sometimes tumultuous past of Konami's gothic masterpiece, covering all of the games released so far.





CASTLEVANIA 1986

The first entry in the series was originally an exclusive release for the Japan-only Famicom Disk System, but it was released on the NES in 1987. Focusing on the heroic Simon Belmont and his quest to destroy Dracula, the game followed a linear route through six different levels. It would later be ported to the Amiga, C64 and PC, with a Game Boy Advance release in 2004.



VAMPIRE KILLER 1986

Despite sharing gameplay, visuals and music with the NES original, the MSX2-only *Vampire Killer* – which was released in Japan, Europe and Brazil, but not the US – actually turned out to be a very different proposition. It was non-linear, featured RPG-like elements and had special items to collect.

HAUNTED CASTLE 1988

Most games series from the '80s usually appeared in arcades before moving to consoles, but *Castlevania* has never been one to follow convention. *Haunted Castle* took the core gameplay of the original and dramatically improved the visuals and sound, but sadly the end result wasn't as spectacular as it could have been. A Japan-only PS2 conversion appeared in 2006.





CASTLEVANIA III: DRACULA'S CURSE 1989

The third NES game is a real gem, mixing together multiple level paths, different playable characters and some of the best music on Nintendo's seminal 8-bit system. It was also notable for being the first game to showcase Alucard, Dracula's famous offspring.



CASTLEVANIA: THE ADVENTURE 1989

One of the very first Game Boy games, *Castlevania: The Adventure* stands as one of the franchises' most notable missteps. Sluggish controls, poor visuals and terrible level designs made this one for completists only.

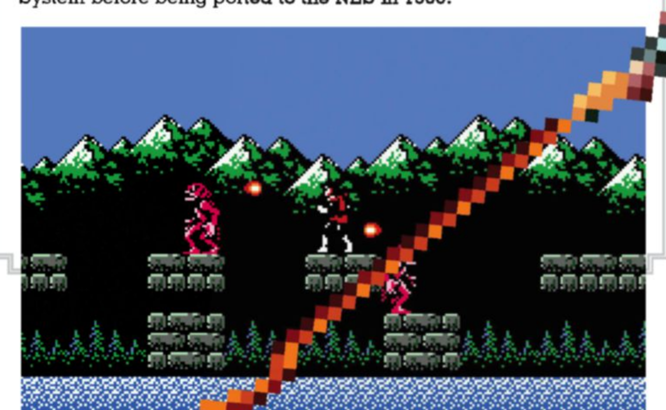


CASTLEVANIA II: BELMONT'S REVENGE 1991

After *Castlevania: The Adventure*, *Belmont's Revenge* was a complete surprise. Considered by many fans to be one of the finest of the "old school" *Castlevania* titles, it pushed the host hardware to the limit. The soundtrack was especially good, with some truly amazing tunes courtesy of Hidehiro Funauchi.

CASTLEVANIA II: SIMON'S QUEST 1987

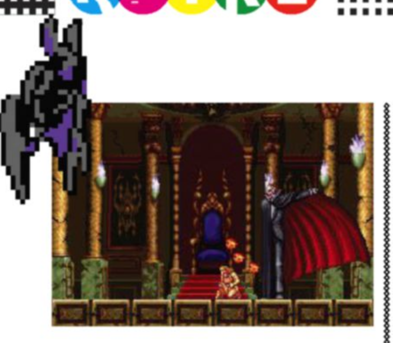
Following the lead of the RPG-like MSX2 *Vampire Killer*, Simon's Quest boasted an open-ended game world which was subject to a day and night cycle. Enemies were more powerful when the sun set, which gave combat an additional challenge. Like its direct predecessor, *Simon's Quest* made its debut on the Famicom Disk System before being ported to the NES in 1988.





SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV 1991

Essentially a remake of the NES original, *Castlevania*'s 16-bit debut was rightly regarded as one of the Super NES' better titles. Eminently playable and dripping with atmosphere, the CD-quality soundtrack was a thing of beauty.



AKUMAJO DRACULA 1993

An exclusive for the Japan-only Sharp X68000 home computer, this was another remake of the original NES game. A PlayStation port – entitled *Castlevania Chronicles* – launched in 2001.

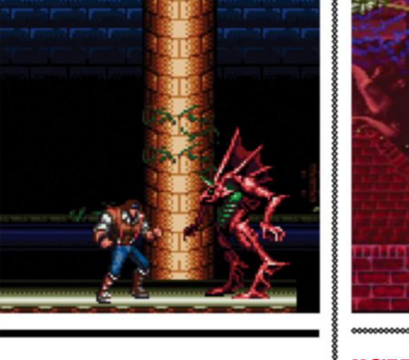
DRACULA X: RONDO OF BLOOD 1993

One of the best titles for NEC's PC Engine CD-ROM system, *Rondo Of Blood* combined anime-style cutscenes with a branching level design to great effect. It remained a Japanese exclusive until it was included as a bonus in the PSP remake in 2007. A Wii Virtual Console release followed in 2010.

CASTLEVANIA: THE NEW GENERATION / BLOODLINES 1994

Castlevania's first Sega outing was very special indeed. Set after the events of World War 1, the game allowed you to control one of two heroes: John Morris (son of Quincy from Bram Stoker's original Dracula novel) and Eric Lecarde. Level designs were inventive, taking the player to landmarks such as Atlantis, The Leaning Tower of Pisa and a German munitions factory.







CASTLEVANIA: DRACULA X 1995

Based on the PC Engine *Rondo of Blood*, *Dracula X* removed the non-linear progression and the additional playable character. Released in Europe as *Castlevania: Vampire's Kiss*, it's very hard to find today, despite the rather negative reaction it received.

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT 1997

The game which gave rise to the term "Metroidvania", *Symphony Of The Night* took the core *Castlevania* gameplay and added in a huge, gear-gated castle, as well as RPG elements such as experience points and different weapons, armour and items to collect. Another twist was the fact that the lead character was Dracula's troubled son Alucard.

"SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT TOOK THE CORE CASTLEVANIA GAMEPLAY AND ADDED IN A GEAR-GATED CASTLE"

CASTLEVANIA: LEGENDS 1997

Notable for being the first game in the lineage to boast a female lead character, *Legends* sadly had little else going for it aside from its drive to promote gender equality. The level designs were poor, the action boring and the visuals worse than those seen in *Belmont's Revenge*. It's worth a pretty penny these days, but ignore unless you're a hardcore collector.



THE BELMONT CLAN

SIMON BELMONT



Arguably the franchise's most famous protagonist, Simon has starred in several outings, including the first two NES games, *Castlevania Judgement* and the recent *Lords Of Shadow: Mirror Of Fate*.

CHRISTOPHE BELMONT



The hero of the first two Game Boy titles, Christopher has to rescue his son Soleil in *Belmont's Revenge*.

TREVOR BELMONT



An ancestor of Simon Belmont, Trevor makes his debut in *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*. He also makes appearances in *Castlevania: Curse of Darkness* and *Lords Of Shadow: Mirror of Fate*.



BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW: DAVE COX

Castlevania series producer, Konami

What made you a fan of the series?
The original 8-bit game was one of the first console games I ever bought. It really stood out on the shelf as it had silver packaging when most other games were black. I really liked the art on the cover and once I got it home, I was hooked. I bought each *Castlevania* game as it was released, but it was *Super Castlevania IV* that really made me realise I wanted to make games and I wanted to work in the industry specifically for Konami. It would be a few years later, but my dream eventually came true.

Which instalment is your personal favourite, and why?
Super Castlevania IV is my favourite. The atmosphere, variety of enemies and the music that was so dark and moody. I loved that game and in fact I still do, to me it's the best game in the series.

Few videogame franchises are able to remain relevant across several consecutive hardware generations. Why do you think *Castlevania* has been able to do this?
I think because it has managed to evolve over time and appeal to new audiences. The original games are very different from the N64 games and the Metroidvanias are very different from the classics. We've had a fighting game and more RPG elements and now we have a hack and slash style game. Game series usually get tired after two or three iterations, but *Castlevania* has managed to avoid that with interesting new ideas and angles on the core themes of the series that have allowed it to remain fresh.

Castlevania has a reputation for amazing music; which soundtrack is the best, in your opinion?
Super Castlevania IV because it evokes a deep dark atmosphere and feels epic at the same time. I also like the soundtrack to *Symphony Of The Night*, especially the orchestral stuff.

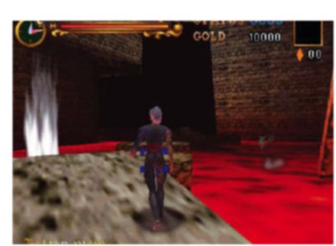
As a fan, what has it been like to influence the direction of *Castlevania* and bring it to a new, wider audience?
Enjoyable, nerve-wracking, stressful and rewarding. There are a lot of pressures mostly from yourself to deliver something that will be memorable and hopefully stand the test of time. Throughout the development process we always felt we were making game history and we felt it and tried to honour the heritage of those who went before us.

Where would you like the series to go from here?
Honestly I don't have a strong opinion, I see this as a torch being passed down and it's our turn to pass the torch on. I am looking forward to seeing what a new team can bring to the mythology and universe of *Castlevania*.



CASTLEVANIA 64 1999

Castlevana's first step into the realm of 3D divided critics and fans alike, but was moderately successful in transporting the vampire-killing action to a new dimension. However, following *Symphony Of The Night* was a tough move, and time hasn't been kind to the rather crude visuals.



CASTLEVANIA: LEGACY OF DARKNESS 1999

The original N64 *Castlevania* was supposed to feature the wolfman Cornell, but he was removed at the last minute and instead stars in this sequel. Like its forerunner, *Legacy Of Darkness* wasn't perfect by any means, but had just about enough of the old *Castlevania* magic to make it worth a look.

CASTLEVANIA: CIRCLE OF THE MOON 2001

The first of three Game Boy Advance "Metroidvania" outings, *Circle Of The Moon* was a launch day game for Nintendo's handheld. Tiny sprites and very basic RPG elements made this a weak facsimile of *Symphony Of The Night*, but the next two games would improve on the formula.



CASTLEVANIA CHRONICLES 2001

Chronicles was essentially the Sharp X68000 Akumajo Dracula with a fresh lick of paint. It contained the original game and a new version with fresh character designs from Ayami Kojima, who also supplied the character artwork for *Symphony Of The Night*.





CASTLEVANIA: HARMONY OF DISSONANCE 2002

The second Game Boy Advance "Metroidvania", *Harmony Of Dissonance* contained improved visuals but noticeably worse music. The level design was also a little bland, but the inclusion of a dash move made it feel fast-paced and exciting.

SONIA BELMONT



Sonia starred in the disappointing *Castlevania Legends*. The game's story alludes to the fact that Alucard and Sonia had a child – which seems to indicate that the Belmont line contains vampire blood.

RICHTER BELMONT



Star of *Rondo of Blood*, Richter would also feature in *Symphony Of The Night* and *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles*.

JUSTE BELMONT

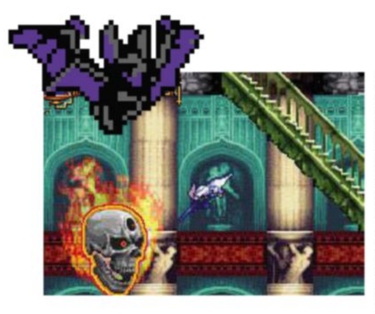


Simon's grandson and the hero of *Harmony Of Dissonance*, Juste is especially adept at spellcasting thanks to his Belnades lineage.

JULIUS BELMONT

Chronologically, it's Julius who is the most recent Belmont, having soundly defeated Dracula in 1999, prior to the events of *Aria Of Sorrow*.





CASTLEVANIA: ARIA OF SORROW 2003

■ The second Game Boy Advance "Metroidvania", *Harmony Of Dissonance* contained improved visuals but noticeably worse music. The level design was also bland, but the inclusion of a dash move made it feel fast-paced.



CASTLEVANIA: LAMENT OF INNOCENCE 2003

■ Undeterred by the lukewarm critical reception afforded to the N64 instalments, Konami soldiered on into the 3D arena with *Lament Of Innocence*, a PS2 action adventure that once again tried to pull *Castlevania* free of its 2D heritage. The *Devil May Cry*-style action was thrilling, but the repetitive gameplay let it down.



CASTLEVANIA: CURSE OF DARKNESS 2005

■ *Lament of Innocence* was followed by this PS2 and Xbox sequel, but despite a move towards a more open-ended game world – like the one seen in *Symphony Of The Night* – the same mistakes were sadly committed. For large portions of *Curse Of Darkness* you were simply battling the same enemies down identical corridors. An attempt to tie in the action with the events of *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse* livened things up a little, but not much.

"DESPITE A MOVE TOWARDS A MORE OPEN-ENDED WORLD, THE SAME MISTAKES WERE COMMITTED"

CASTLEVANIA: DAWN OF SORROW 2005

■ The first of three outings on the Nintendo DS, *Dawn Of Sorrow* was a direct sequel to the Game Boy Advance *Aria Of Sorrow*, and shared many of the same cast members. Aside from some rather gimmicky touch-screen spell drawing, it was a solid release that benefited from a soul-stealing power system, offering plenty of replay value.

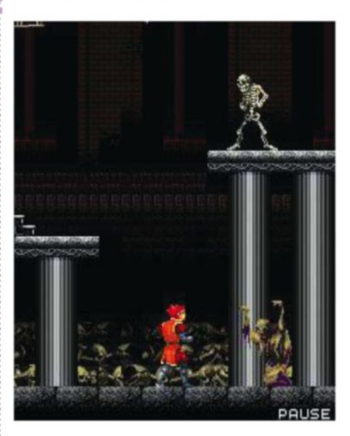


CASTLEVANIA: PORTRAIT OF RUIN 2006

■ The second DS game took place after *Castlevania: Bloodlines*, and stars John Morris' son as the hero. Levels took place inside paintings, allowing the developers to be a bit more creative with the locations. While it didn't really do all that much new, *Portrait Of Ruin* proved just how enduring the Metroidvania format could be.

CASTLEVANIA: ORDER OF SHADOWS 2007

■ Before iOS and Android turned up, mobile phone players were subjected to some pretty dire titles, and *Order Of Shadows* was one of them. Clunky controls, a narrow screen, terrible music and irksome action made this a *Castlevania* entry to forget. Thankfully, few know it even existed.



CASTLEVANIA: THE DRACULA X CHRONICLES 2007

■ A 2.5D remake of *Rondo Of Blood*, *Dracula X Chronicles* also included the PC Engine version as well as *Symphony Of The Night*, both in emulated form. The remake itself was merely OK – the new visuals actually look worse than those of the 8-bit original – but having all three games in a single package made this an appealing purchase.



JOHN MORRIS



■ Distant relation to the Belmonts and the son of Quincy Morris – a character from the original Bram Stoker novel – John fights against the resurrection of Dracula at the hands of the evil Elizabeth Bartley.

JONATHAN MORRIS



■ John Morris' son and one of the two heroes of *Portrait Of Ruin*. Rising to fame in 1944, he's one of the most recent vampire killers of the Belmont bloodline.

REINHARDT SCHNEIDER

■ This character from *Castlevania 64* was originally known as Schneider Belmont. Despite this, he's very much a Belmont and wields the whip as good as any of his ancestors.

LEON BELMONT

■ Born in the 11th century, Leon is technically the first Belmont to take up the fight against Dracula. He is the lead of the PS2 title *Castlevania: Lament Of Innocence*.



CASTLEVANIA: ORDER OF ECCLESIA 2008

The final instalment on the DS is unique in offering the first female lead since *Castlevania Legends*, but some commented at the time of release that the Metroidvania format was growing rather stale.



CASTLEVANIA: THE ARCADE 2009

Castlevania's return to amusement arcades was something of a departure for the franchise. Instead of being a action platformer, it took the form of a light gun game in the same vein as *Time Crisis* and *Virtua Cop*, but with whipping replacing blasting. The game remains an arcade exclusive.



CASTLEVANIA JUDGMENT 2008

This ill-advised attempt to turn *Castlevania* into a 3D, arena-based brawler was as bad as it sounds on paper. Characters are pulled from several games thanks to a hokey time travel plot line, and the anime-style visuals – created by Death Note manga artist Takeshi Obata – felt hopelessly at odds with the *Castlevania* series.

CASTLEVANIA: THE ADVENTURE REBIRTH 2009

Alongside *Gradius and Contra*, *Castlevania* was given the "Rebirth" treatment on Nintendo's WiiWare download service. Despite the title, this had little to do with the Game Boy original, and was instead a very impressive old-school outing complete with fine 2D visuals, a soundtrack packed with famous tunes and a beastly level of challenge. Worth every penny, then.



CASTLEVANIA PUZZLE: ENCORE OF THE NIGHT 2010

Those hoping for a true sequel to *Symphony Of The Night* were disappointed to discover that this iOS outing was little more than a derivative puzzle game with assets stripped from the original 1997 classic. Fun for a while, but the *Castlevania* name felt entirely tacked-on.



CASTLEVANIA: HARMONY OF DESPAIR 2010

Xbox Live Arcade title *Harmony Of Despair* is indicative of just how confused and rudderless the *Castlevania* series was prior to the *Lords Of Shadow* reboot. Part online multiplayer title, part traditional Metroidvania, the result was a confused mess which turned out to be neither fun to play nor particularly impressive.



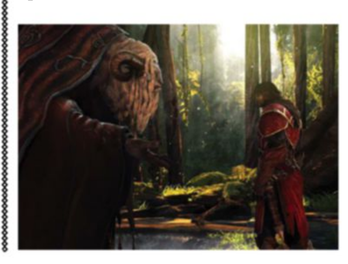


CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2 2013

Not yet released at the time of writing, *Lords Of Shadow 2* places you in the role of Dracula as he navigates a Gothic, modern-day city in an effort to reclaim his former powers.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2010

With sales dwindling and fans becoming increasingly restless for a return to form, Konami took a massive gamble with this 360 and PS3 offering. Spanish developer MercurySteam was brought on board, and even Hideo Kojima was involved at one point. The final product was exactly what the series needed; packed with *God Of War*-style action and some stunning visuals, *Lords Of Shadow* annoyed purists but delighted practically everybody else. It's the most commercially successful *Castlevania* game to date, which speaks volumes.



GABRIEL BELMONT



The hero of *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*, Gabriel is voiced by Scottish actor Robert Carlyle and is deeply troubled by the death of his beloved.

DESMOND BELMONT



The central character of the mobile title *Castlevania: Order Of Shadows*. Desmond is notable predominantly for his spiky haircut.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW – MIRROR OF FATE 2013

MercurySteam's 3DS sequel is set in the middle of the *Lords Of Shadow* trilogy and pays fan service by including Simon Belmont, Trevor Belmont and Alucard – albeit in a drastically re-imaging storyline which pays little attention to series canon. The 2.5D platforming action was combined with methodical combat, making for a game which was unique, even when placed alongside other 2D entries.

ESSENTIALS

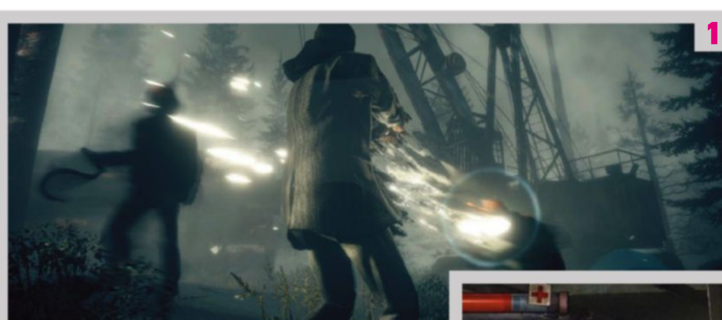
10 XBOX 360 GAMES TO PLAY BEFORE THE XBOX ONE ARRIVES

Xbox One is on its way, for better or worse (you decide!). But with a few months to go until release, there is still plenty in the Xbox 360 back catalogue that's deserving of your attention. These exclusives are worth picking up if you've never sampled them before, and of course, justify revisiting if you're already familiar with them.

4



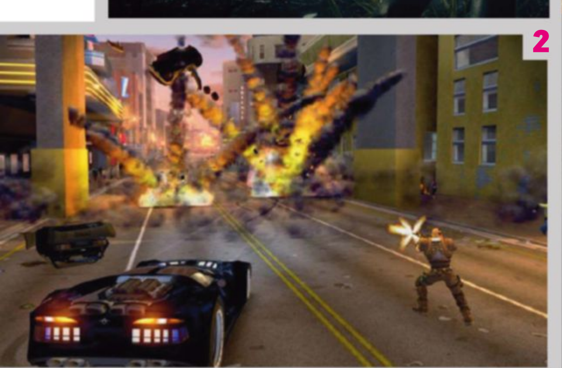
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3

Alan Wake
From: Remedy Entertainment
Release Date:: 14 May 2010

1 At a time when the Xbox 360 was becoming inundated with standard fare third-person shooters, *Alan Wake* arrived with a quirky take on the genre. A self-described psychological action thriller, Remedy Entertainment fed gamers with a distinctively odd concoction of *Twin Peaks* and Stephen King, married to a well-executed light-and-dark mechanic that eliminated the need for an arbitrary cover system in creating an engaging combat experience. As far as the survival horror genre had fallen, *Alan Wake* attacked it sideways with a very specific set of influences. A welcome tonal departure from everything else.

Crackdown
From: Realtime Worlds
Release Date: 23 February 2007

2 *Grand Theft Auto* and *Lemmings* creator David Jones came to Microsoft with *Crackdown*, the debut title from his studio Realtime Worlds. Abandoning the criminal ways of *GTA*, *Crackdown* tasked the player with taking down crime syndicates in the sandbox of Pacific City, with a variety of powers that bought superhero antics straight into the next generation. Players could bound across rooftops, lift cars above their heads, sponge bullets and generally cause chaos, all in the name of the law. Innovative gameplay with striking graphics and two-player co-op over Xbox Live. It became more than the game people bought for the *Halo 3* beta.

Condemned: Criminal Origins
From: Monolith Productions
Release Date: 2 December 2005

3 Channelling the refined horror of *Seven*, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* was a bold launch title for the Xbox 360. Taking a trip into the seedier depths of Metro City, players took on the role of an FBI agent desperately trying to hunt a grizzly serial killer before he claimed more victims. While *Condemned*'s plot was thin, the melee combat still stands as some of the most satisfying on 360, as pipes and pieces of the environment could literally be ripped from walls and utilised as a blunt tool of defence. It hasn't aged well technically, but the bizarre nastiness that permeates the story still makes it more than worthy of a nostalgia trip.

Fable II
From: Lionhead Studios
Release Date: 24 October 2008

4 While it's all too easy to look at the *Fable* franchise and buy into Peter Molyneux's view that he's never made a great game, the second outing in the series is still one of the best action RPGs to grace the 360. Expanding on almost every facet of design from the original, *Fable II* was a delightfully deep adventure tailored to letting players exist as they wished. Its central plot twist – taking the player from the world and imprisoning them for years, so the surrounding world has changed when they return – is one of the generation's most breathtaking design ideas that perhaps doesn't get the credit it deserves.

Gears Of War
From: Epic Games
Release Date: 17 November 2006

5 The switch to next generation consoles left the third-person shooter in disarray, as developers struggled to elevate the core design principles of the genre. Epic Games had two solutions to the problem; an innovative cover system and active reloading. The cover system is still present in games today, allowing for players to seamlessly weave between cover and debris whilst waves of deadly enemies poured into battlefields. It's easy to overlook since we've been swamped with similar titles, but *Gears Of War* changed the way we think about space in a third-person shooter and kick started a memorable trilogy.



Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved 2
From: Bizarre Creations
Release Date: 30 July 2008

6 There are plenty of Xbox Live Arcade games that deserve to make this list, but none more than *Geometry Wars*. While *Retro Evolved* provided players with plenty to do over the launch window drought, its sequel dazzled gamers with an array of improvements. The pulsating soundtrack from Audioantics returned, along with six gameplay modes, same couch co-op and a mesmerising visual assault. If you're in the market for a fast paced shooter, then you can't go wrong with *Geometry Wars.* The twin-stick shooter showed us the potential of the XBLA service to provide valid, non triple-A games and continues to dominate it to this day.

Halo 4
From: 343 Industries
Release Date: 6 November 2012

7 Just when you thought you couldn't handle any more *Halo* in your life, 343 Industries arrived with *Halo 4*. The first game in the canon not directed by Bungie, *Halo 4* somehow surpassed all expectations, delivering what many to believe is the best in the series since *Halo: Combat Evolved*. The first act in a new trilogy, 343 managed to package the best parts of *Halo* together in a way that Bungie never could; yet we'd say that *Halo*'s entire trajectory on 360 brought different strengths, with *Reach* in particular succeeding at campaign storytelling, while *ODST*'s dramatic, last stand-making Firefight mode marked a design highlight.

Lost Odyssey
From: Mistwalker
Release Date: 29 February 2008

8 Back in 2005 Microsoft made a great effort to increase its presence in Japan following the dismal performance of the original Xbox in the region. One such move saw the company obtain the exclusive rights to publish Mistwalker games – the studio helmed by *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi. A stunning and expansive JRPG, *Lost Odyssey* was monstrously long, with Mistwalker using novel-like story sequences to detail the background of *Highlander*-like protagonist Kaim Argonar. They were heavy-handed in form, yet nonetheless an interesting design choice in what was otherwise a strong *Final Fantasy* facsimile.

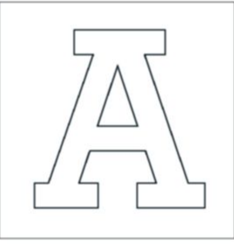
Project Gotham Racing 4
From: Bizarre Creations
Release Date: 12 October 2007

9 Microsoft gamers have been spoiled with fantastic exclusives on the track over the years, but there is nothing else quite as fun as taking to the streets of Tokyo, London and New York in *Project Gotham Racing 4*. Motorbikes added a longer tail to the massive amount of content in the game. Couple a huge selection of cars with a dynamic weather system and you have one of the best racing games ever released. *PGR4* was great on and offline; with its dedicated community continuing to experiment with the various game types long after Bizarre Creations shut its doors. Fingers crossed the series returns someday.

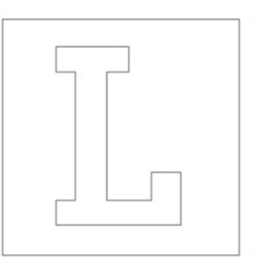
Viva Piñata: Trouble In Paradise
From: Rare
Developer: 5 September 2008

10 Look past its visual cuteness, and you'll see *Viva Piñata* is one of the Xbox 360's most deranged titles. Players are tasked with enticing piñata creatures to live in their garden, filling them with candy and then shipping them off to parties for children to crush gleefully. *Viva Piñata* is, mechanically, as accomplished as *The Sims* or *Animal Crossing* and proved that the Xbox 360 can be about more than guns and explosions. As an added bonus, if you don't like a particular type of Piñata you can smash them with a shovel and let the other inhabitants of your garden cannibalise their chocolaty remains. As we said, wonderfully deranged.













GAMESTICK

MANUFACTURER: **PlayJam** / PRICE: **£79.99**

WHILE OUYA MAY be the first out of the gate when it comes to getting its crowd-funded, slimline console to market, PlayJam's GameStick is hot on the heels of its Android console competitor. This pocket-sized piece of hardware comes in two parts, with a dual analogue stick controller and the USB-sized console itself that plugs into the HDMI port on your TV.

GameStick has an advantage over Ouya given its portability and price, but there's also a customisable element (interchangeable skins) and the Dock – a peripheral that wirelessly charges the GameStick controller – offers another SD card slot and features ports for keyboard and mouse functionality.

That's not to say that the Android console doesn't have a few challenges, chiefly its lack of compatibility with Google Play, leaving developers to port their titles if they want them to be played on GameStick. There's also a lack of tentpole release to accompany the console at launch, instead relying on existing Android titles. But as an alternative platform for home gaming, the GameStick offers tremendous value, robust design and a huge amount of functionality. The test will be whether there's a market for these machines, given there's already an Android userbase with access to these titles. However, with a sleek design, accessible interface and much exceptional software, GameStick is a worthy alternative to the big budget consoles.





GAMING CLOTHING



E TANK TEE

As the *Mega Man* renaissance roars forwards, this tee celebrates the beverage that keeps Capcom's hero wired.
www.tinyurl.com/mmew7js



FIGHT! LEGGINGS

If your thirst for gaming-themed clothing simply can't be quenched, then slap these *Street Fighter* themed leggings on your stems and get your lower half suitably nerded up.
www.tinyurl.com/n2maloa



JACKET

This letter jacket is themed around indie supernova *Hotline Miami* – albeit missing several gallons of blood caked across it.
www.tinyurl.com/c8767pu



FORIS FS2333 GAMING MONITOR

RETAILER: **EIZO** PRICE: **£282**



FNATIC ESPORTS player, Patrik Sattermon (*Counter-Strike* Pro Gamer) has lent his expertise to Eizo for its new monitor aimed at highly competitive and professional gamers. The main USP is the 'Smart Insight' feature, which enables players to tweak the visuals to increase the clarity and detail of the game's outlines – brightening dark spots and sharpening edges. It removes some of the visual flourish, but the trade-off is worthwhile for maximising perspective and offers a clear advantage over standard monitors. The only real drawback are the dimensions, coming in at a modest 23 inches. But if size doesn't worry you then it is worth considering.

RAZER ATROX

MANUFACTURER: **RAZER** PRICE: **£179.99**

ACCORDING TO RAZER, its Xbox 360 fight stick was "forged from the fires of an arcade gaming legacy." However, its slick design and robust casing makes it fairly indistinguishable from other quality sticks that are available. Nevertheless, it does boast an exceptional performance, with its eight authentic Sanwa Denshi face buttons angled for comfort, and being responsive and quiet enough to not irk anyone in the vicinity. The rubbish finish on the underside keeps the pad firmly rooted in place, and the extended USB cable is an added bonus. Mad Catz users may find the difference in button configuration disorientating, but aside from that minor quibble it's a stick that packs plenty of punch.

MARIO KART 7 MICRODRIVE

MANUFACTURER: **TOMY** PRICE: **$44.99 (£29)**

THERE ARE ENDEARING toys and there are endearing toys, and then there's this *Mario Kart* remote control kart. Annoy family, friends and pets with this miniature Mario on wheels, based on his appearance in last year's 3DS sequel. We wouldn't recommend driving it off cliffs or submerging it underwater in the hope that it will sprout wings or a propeller, but it can do a wheelie, which is something. Banana peel sold separately.




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League Of Legends is fast and unforgiving.
Let us help with your first steps into this world



Beginners Guide

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

AS A NEW GENRE BEGINS TO EVOLVE, NOW IS THE BEST TIME TO EXPERIENCE THIS EXCITING MOBA

Some videogames are designed to be easy to pick up and play, others are not. While *League Of Legends* can sound simple enough on the surface, many aspects of its moment-to-moment gameplay can be downright puzzling to the uninitiated. While Riot Games' *League Of Legends* may have been inspired by the *Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos* mod *Defence Of The Ancients*, in the four years since release it has become one of the most popular games in the world, averaging a total of 12 million daily players across the globe.

League Of Legends has several different modes, but most of the games are played out across the five vs five map Summoner's Rift. Here, there are two Nexus crystals with three paths, called lanes, connecting them, and the aim of the game is to push down the lanes and destroy the enemy's Nexus whilst defending your own. At regular intervals, each base spawns minions that march down the lanes and attack the first hostile they encounter. Positioned down the lanes are three powerful enemy towers that will need to be reduced to rubble before your team can launch an assault. The area between the lanes is called the jungle, for now you should avoid it at all costs.

League Of Legends gets a bad rep because of its community, often profiled as a hostile crowd, but the reality of things is that as long as you're up-front about your ability you'll likely find that players are more than willing to offer advice – just remember to extend the same courtesy.

7 WAYS TO Guarantee Early Success In League Of Legends

1 Tutorial
The fairly arbitrary tutorial should be suffered through, it'll teach many of the basic mechanics and give you an easy introduction to the offbeat pacing of games.

2 Set Expectations
The multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) is a budding genre, so don't expect to be topping leaderboards immediately. Set your expectations low and learn the ropes.

3 Player Versus Player
While you could jump straight into PvP, it is worth using the five-versus-bots mode to sample the ten free characters available to discover what you want your role to be.

4 Retreating Isn't Embarrassing
If you find yourself face-to-face with an enemy champion, try to kite them towards a friendly turret. It'll prioritise your safety over everything else, warding off enemies with powerful energy attacks.

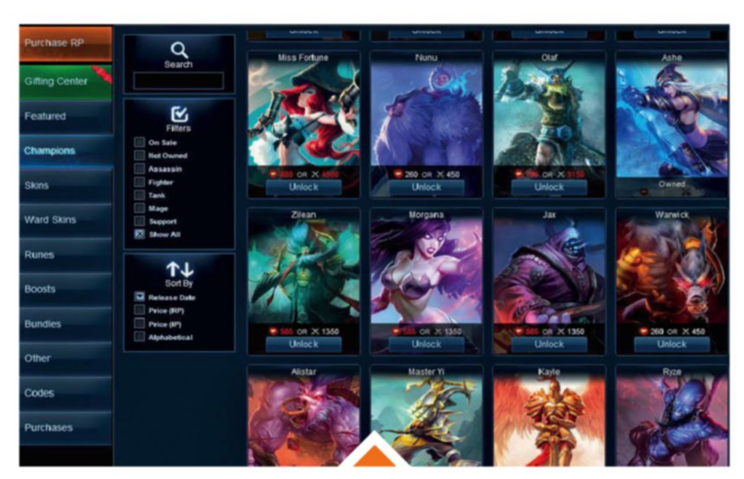
5 Be Polite
It's easy to get frustrated when things aren't going your way, but the best course of action is to be honest with your capabilities. It'll save you a lot of hassle.

6 Monetisation
As you complete games, you gain Influence Points (IP) that can be spent on new champions. Alternatively, you can also purchase them with Riot Points (RP), gathered with real money, if you're impatient.

7 Starting Characters
A good set of starting champions include; Ashe for big ranged damage, Shen is a great beginner tank, while Sona and Ryze will introduce you to the support and magic roles respectively.

Exploring a new frontier

GETTING STARTED WITH LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

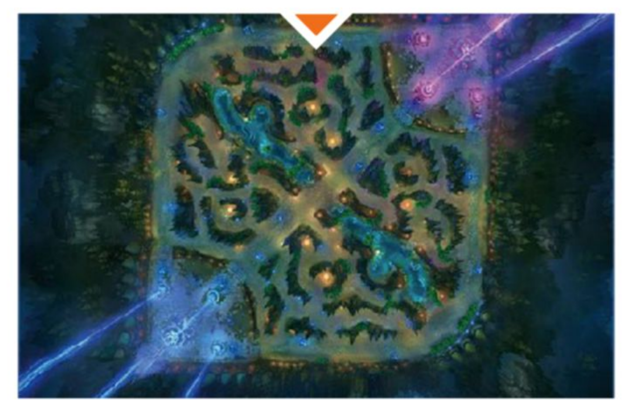


YOUR ALTER EGO

■ THERE ARE over one hundred champions within *League Of Legends*, but it is important that you choose one who suits your play style. Common team builds include champions that deal heavy attack damage (AD carry), one that deals magic damage (AP mid), a tank, a support and a champion who can be self-sufficient outside of the lanes (jungler). There are ten free champions every week, and the others can be unlocked with in-game points.

CHOOSE YOUR LANE

■ EACH TEAM usually sends one champion (the AP mid) to the middle lane, and two champions to each of the outside lanes. An AD carry and support will head towards the bottom lane to push forward, while a tank usually occupies the top lane. A jungler will move freely between the lanes, but will offer support to the top where possible. As a new player, you should go to the bottom lane to ensure you have another champion by your side when the action kicks off.





THE KILLING BLOW

■ YOUR PRIORITIES should be to level up quickly by killing minions and to hoard as much gold as possible to purchase new items. Landing the killing blow on an enemy will grant the greatest rewards, though it can take some practice. Melee characters may struggle to do this effectively, so it's best to get the art down through ranged combat. Ignore antagonising rival champions for now; gearing up quickly will only increase your DPS and survivability – a must in *League Of Legends*.



AVOID BUYER'S REMORSE

■ MATCHES TYPICALLY last between 20-40 minutes, and you will steadily accumulate gold throughout. The store is the most overwhelming aspect of *League Of Legends*, so while you learn the ropes it is wise buy from the recommended list of gear. This will get you on the road to victory, though if you're enjoying a particular champion it is worth trawling the internet for an item guide. Players have already tried hundreds of item builds so you don't have to.





PICK YOUR BATTLES

■ REGARDLESS OF what lane you occupy, you need to be aware of the five enemy champions wandering the map. The key to success is the art of staying alive, so staying vigilant is a top priority. Dying grants your killer a ton of XP, and a few early deaths can derail an entire lane. Try to avoid tunnel vision and keep an eye on the minimap. If you notice an enemy champion drop into the jungle be sure to alert your allies.

CONSOLE MMO REVIVAL



As developers finally get to grips with current gen and look forward to the next, can MMOs finally succeed on the platform that has always eluded them?

Massively multiplayer online games never found their footing on home consoles. Every system launched since Sega's ill-fated Dreamcast has flirted with bringing MMOs away from the desk and onto the couch, but the results have varied massively. PC enthusiasts can look towards *Ultima Online* as the genesis of the MMO, and similarly we can look towards *Phantasy Star Online* as the first foray into console MMOs – the whirl of a 56k modem transporting players to new frontiers.

Sadly, the early success of *PSO* and the PlayStation 2's *Everquest Online Adventures* proved to be an unceremonious high for the genre, as developers struggled to balance the huge cost associated with MMOs and designing a game that was suitable for both PC and console audiences. *Final Fantasy XI* arrived with the scope to challenge *World Of Warcraft*, but the menu-driven gameplay and interface-heavy combat proved too be too much for a controller to handle, while *Phantasy Star Universe* was so shallow that



While Xbox One has MMOs, the PS4 could easily become the home of emergent experiences.

■ Bungie's *Destiny* will no doubt look to the success of *Defiance* as it designs its MMO-inspired FPS.

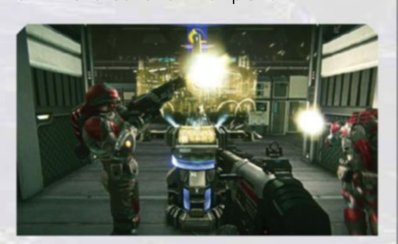
"Our plan right now is to basically take the PC game with maximum settings and have that be running on the PlayStation 4" **PlanetSide 2 creative director Matt Higby**

the series became barely a shadow of its former self. Both games failed to showcase the power of the Xbox 360, nor the potential MMOs have on the platform – it's no surprise Huxley never materialised.

As we approach the end of the current console cycle and look towards Microsoft and Sony's next-gen offerings, it's clear that the future is looking much brighter for MMOs. Seven years after the launch of *FFXI* and *PSU*, we are finally seeing developers begin to tailor their games to the platform, instead of lazily porting them and hoping for the best. Trion Worlds' *Defiance* has proved to be an early success, with players flocking towards the streets of a post-apocalyptic San Francisco in an effort to engage in massive firefights.

"It was a huge learning curve for us because there is no other game like it," explained *Defiance*'s senior producer Rob Hill. "We had to solve the problems of, 'How do you make it fun for all these people? How do you make a boss fun for 50 people? It's never really been done, so it took a lot of time for us to figure it out."

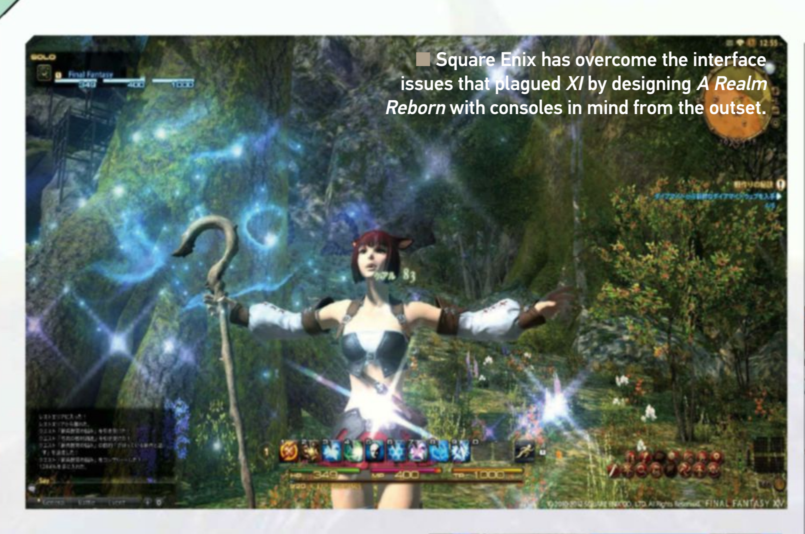
"The hardware we built it on was seven years old, and to have hundreds of players on a machine that's seven years old, and still make it competitive with single-and-four player games was a challenge," Hill says, though he assures us that *Defiance* has found unlikely success, not on PC, but on Xbox 360. "Our largest market right now is Xbox 360, which surprised me. Xbox has a huge shooter audience, but they really got drawn to the tons and tons of players thing. Even though we have this really engaging storyline, we find that players spend a lot more time at these [large] events. This is where they meet other players, this is where they make their friends and their clans," he says, adding, "Microsoft was really excited to see that, and the fact that they actually got an MMO to launch on their platform."



■ A massive boost to the PS4 line-up, *PlanetSide 2* is coming early 2014.

Defiance isn't the only game that has found unlikely success on console. In fact, a brief chat with Sony Online Entertainment's executive producer Larry Liberty reveals that *DC Universe Online* has found a sizeable player base on PS3, enough to guarantee it a port over to PlayStation 4. "We proved that we could get a full-featured MMO onto the PS3 and that it could be very successful. The majority of our player base is on the PS3, and we get thousands of new players each day. Despite the challenges, we have learned so much about how to make this genre work better on consoles for years to come."

FFXI and the original launch of *Final Fantasy XIV* were expensive mistakes, but it seems Square Enix is finally learning its lessons. *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* is a brave new jaunt into the MMO world for the developer, with our extensive hands-on with the beta revealing a game that is not only set to expand upon the previously held expectations of theme park experiences, but



Square Enix has overcome the interface issues that plagued *XI* by designing *A Realm Reborn* with consoles in mind from the outset.

finally prove that fully fledged MMOs have a place mapped to a 16-button gamepad.

"When we started development on *A Realm Reborn*, our first goal was to create a perfect mouse and keyboard control scheme, as this has long been the global standard for MMORPGs. Once that had been created it was then vital to make a gamepad interface that would not be slower than the mouse and keyboard setup when actually playing the game," reveals director and producer Yoshida Naoki. "So basically, the project's objective was to realise two different but equal control schemes for two input devices right from the start. This was a massive challenge from both a costs point of view and also from a technical one."

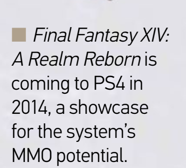
Final Fantasy's multiple attempts to break into the MMO console scene were plagued with interface problems, and this is the major design hurdle that newly emerging games will need to overcome should the genre find success on the platform. We are already seeing many developers already making strides to fix the ghosts of the past; with Sony's *PlanetSide 2* experimenting with touchpad control on the DualShock 4 and ZeniMax's *The Elder Scrolls Online* creating systems in-line with the solo RPG outings. For *A Realm Reborn*, Square Enix



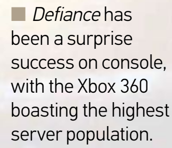
was eager to bring the full MMO experience to consoles, and has created two separate interfaces no matter your poison, be it controller or traditional set-up.

"If you try to map the traditional RPG command implementation system on to a gamepad then you will need a three-step process of specifying the target, selecting the action you want to perform and then pressing a button to perform the action," says Naoki. "In doing this, an action that could be done in two stages on the PC and this will unavoidably influence the speed of decision making and player action, which will cause massive problems for cross platform play."

"To address this we invented the cross hot bar interface, which allows up to 16 different actions to be activated via a two-step process using the L2 and R2 triggers. It was an incredibly tough challenge to



Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn is coming to PS4 in 2014, a showcase for the system's MMO potential.



Defiance has been a surprise success on console, with the Xbox 360 boasting the highest server population.

implement two different interfaces at the same time."

While *A Realm Reborn* will be making the jump to PS4 in 2014 alongside *The Elder Scrolls Online*, the game will be about ready to go on PlayStation 3 and PC by the time this issue of **games™** is in your hands – and if it fails to resonate with players once again, then the chance of other big budget MMOs making their way to consoles could already be in jeopardy before next-gen even begins. That's why we are looking towards Sony Online Entertainments' *PlanetSide 2* and *DC Universe Online* as brave examples of different kinds of experiences making the transition.

"Our plan right now is to basically take the PC game with maximum settings and have that be running on the PS4," says *PlanetSide 2* creative director Matt Higby. "So there won't be any limitations in terms of number of players, there won't be any limitations on the maps – so you aren't going to get any dumbed down maps or anything like that – the biggest difference that you'll see is going to be interface elements, they'll be customised to work better with a console controller and other tweaks that make things work on a console game. But

"Our plan right now is to basically take the PC game with 'The project's objective was to realise two different but equal control schemes for two different input devices right from the start' settings and have that be running on the PlayStation 4"

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn director Yoshida Naoki



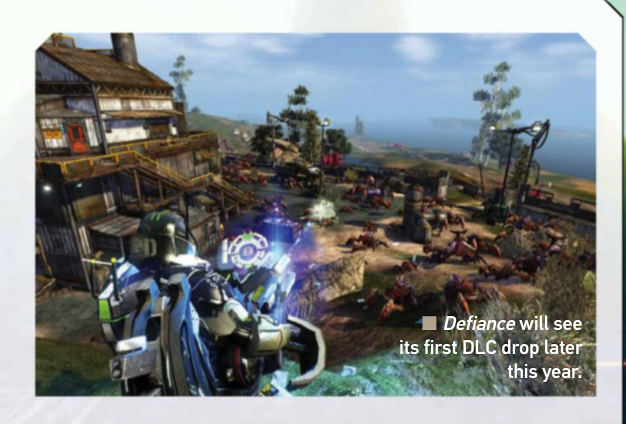


there won't be any core gameplay mechanic changes that make PlanetSide what it is. You'll still have thousands of players per continents, all the vehicles and really deep character progression – all that stuff is going to remain intact."

"*PlanetSide* at its heart is an FPS, and FPS games work pretty well on consoles. People will come into arguments over whether a keyboard & mouse is a superior control device for an FPS game, but an FPS game is fully controllable on a console and the PS4 obviously has some really cool mechanics that allow the user interface to be even more interesting on a console. For instance, the ability to have tilt control on a flight model [using the DualShock 4 SixAxis] is pretty neat. It's something PC players won't have access to," says Higby.

Higby revealed that the team behind *PlanetSide 2* is working 60-80 hour weeks to not only continue to update the PC version, but to make sure the port is as similar to the PC iteration as possible. We are only just starting to see what the future holds for the Xbox One and PS4, though it's certainly an exciting time to be both a fan of MMOs and couch gameplay. Higby believes that publishers have finally learnt from the past and are ready to utilise next-gen as a way of opening the gates to new worlds and experiences.

"I do think we are going to see a big shift in connectivity, with massively multiplayer games becoming the norm, as publishers start to catch up with server technology and… these games aren't simple to do, that's why we see so many broken and busted companies along the organ trail towards MMO games, because it is very challenging to run them, but I think as more people are seeing the potential, it's really exciting to see what they are coming up with."



Defiance will see its first DLC drop later this year.

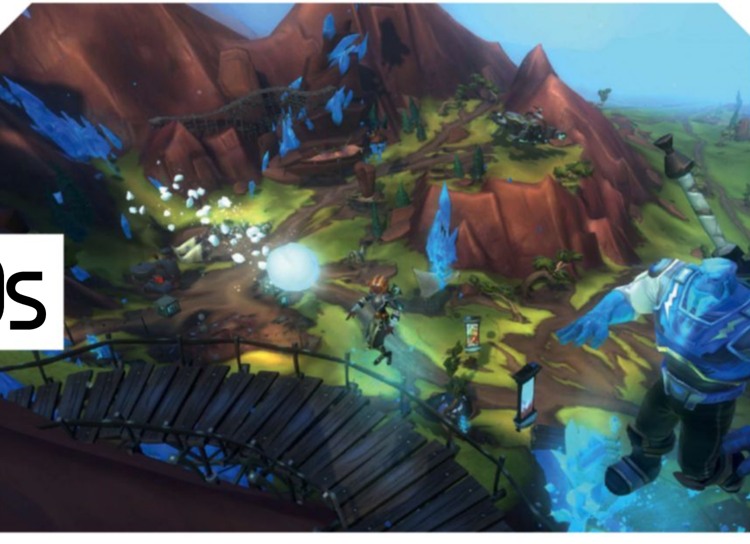
PlanetSide 2 is bringing the full PC experience onto PS4, though the servers will still be separated.

THE RISE OF AMBIENT CONNECTIVITY

THE PLAYSTATION 4 and Xbox One are still frustratingly out of reach, and until the consoles are in our lounges we won't be able to fully understand what the increased presence of connectivity and cloud based gaming will bring, though *PlanetSide 2* creative director Matt Higby is excited about the potential these new consoles will bring. "To me, the thing that is most exciting about this next generation of consoles and the connectivity that they're going to have is just seeing what people do with ambient connectivity. There are a lot of games that have come out recently like *Journey* and *Demons' Souls*, games like that, that just have this ambient connectivity built into them, and I'm really excited to see what the next generation of consoles does for that."

WildStar: Worlds Apart From Other MMOs

WITH A MORE COLOURFUL WORLD AND A REVOLUTIONARY PATHFINDING SYSTEM, WE SPEAK TO NCSOFT ABOUT BREAKING NEW GROUND WITH ITS MMO…



There's some fantastical enemy design in *WildStar*, inspired by both sci-fi and fantasy. Taking down beasts such as this will likely reap great benefits for you and your group.

The MMO as we know it is in a state of disarray. *World Of Warcraft*'s subscription numbers are plummeting, *Rift* and *Tera: Rising* have made the free-to-play jump, and consoles are once again flirting gingerly with the genre as the jump to the next generation approaches. Carbine Studios' ambitious new title *WildStar* has been promising to shake up the industry since 2011, but as it finally approaches open beta the opportunity to get hands-on beyond the hype will soon be upon us.

Happily straddling the line between science fiction and fantasy, *WildStar* immediately makes an impression with its vivid colour palette, heavily stylised character design and world painted with colourful brush strokes. "That came from our art director Matt Mocarski," reveals design producer Stephan Frost, as he elaborates on how Nexus' larger than life style came to be. "He worked on stuff like *World Of Warcraft* and *Jak and Daxter*, and he's a big fan of Mike Mignola (*Hellboy* creator) and a lot of other comic book artists. We definitely wanted something that was bright and stylish, as well as something that would hold up over years and years," he says adding, "Lots of MMOs can be a bit drab, and grey and brown, and we wanted to get away from that."

WildStar seems to be taking massive steps to differentiate itself from its competitors, risky business when MMO players tend to stick with what they know.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: NCsoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: US



PvP is undergoing a massive change as Resilience becomes a base stat for all characters. Blizzard is attempting to open Battlegrounds up to more players, so those geared for PvE content will find their items scale in PvP modes to an appropriate level.

Where Carbine Studios is hoping *WildStar* will make the broadest changes from the litany of other MMORPGs on the market is with the innovative path system. While the regular class levelling up systems are all present and accounted for, your path will define who your character is in Nexus.

"The path system is very much your gameplay style. Your class is how you kill things, whereas the path is how you want to play the game," explains Frost. "So if you're a killer we have the soldier, so you'll get swat and assassination missions. Explorers can go find the highest mountain or find hidden caves for XP boosts and that, and then if you want to be a settler you are able to build things to help people out. Scientists are for the people that love lore and want to find out more about the world."

The various paths highlight how much variety Carbine is stuffing into the *WildStar* package. The studio is trying to deliver a product that accommodates everyone, though it does of course risk satisfying nobody in its ambitious venture. That said, what we've seen and played of *WildStar* so far has been enjoyable enough. The traditional structure of *World Of Warcraft* has been retained, with familiar quest givers littering the world alongside computer terminals that are there to deliver path-specific missions.

INVESTING IN YOUR FUTURE

One aspect of *WildStar* we are only just starting to see unveiled is the way Carbine Studios is letting players plant their legacy onto the world of Nexus. From level six, players can purchase a plot of land and begin to build a house. While the freedom doesn't seem to match the scale of *ArcheAge*'s housing ambition or the freedom of construction granted by *The Sims*, it is still an interesting addition to the MMO that is already bursting at the seams with content.



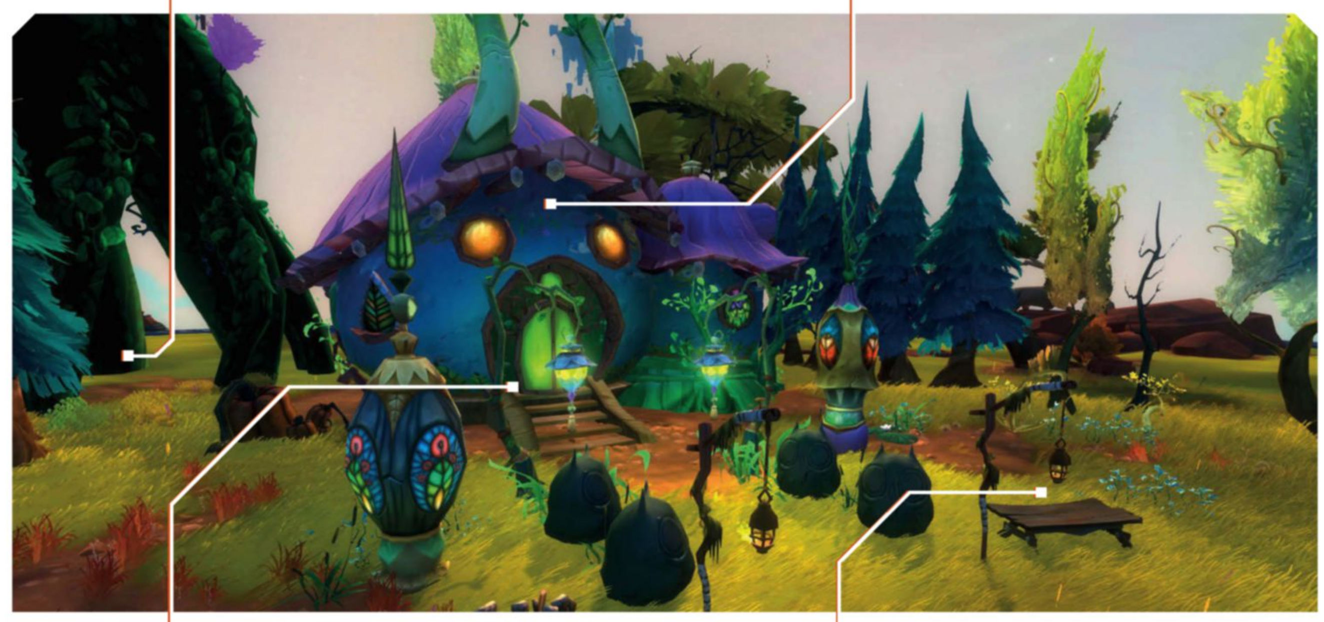
MINI CHALLENGES

CARBINE HASN'T revealed the full range being implemented, but players will also be able to take part in challenges on their plot of land. For example, building a hedge maze might spawn rare mobs that you can chase down for loot.



LEND HELPING HAND

GIVE A FRIEND permission to enter your house and they will be able to help tend to its upkeep in your absence and gain mutual rewards. If your friend happens to be on the Settler path, they'll even be able to make use of your crafting table to forge new exotic items.





FLEXIBILITY

ONCE INSIDE the house, the systems are fairly flexible. Resting and logging out in your house will grant extra rested XP, an element of feng shui will bring bigger rewards and items can be freely placed, allowing creative players to create lofts and structures through clever item placement.



CONVENIENT AND FUNCTIONAL

THE OUTSIDE area of your house can be decorated, but the real interest comes from the ability to add helpful stations. Like to raid? Add a raid portal. Desperate for materials? Build a mine. Most additions also come with daily quests that reap rewards right to your doorstep.

There's no longer an aimless wander through acres and acres of desert sand to get to the next mission. If you miss a quest, whether it is intentional or accidental, the NPC will contact you and offer the quest to you over your in-game communication device should you be in the correct area. It is systems like this that reveal a game designed to accommodate your style of play, instead of punishing you for individuality. Quests will reveal themselves at every turn, branching from other activities and evolving into multiple progression paths. Carbine is trying to create a world where there is something new to do at every turn, but in aiming *WildStar* at a shrinking market that still seems happy enough to indulge theme park experiences, it could fall on pre-occupied fingers.

WildStar is yet to settle on a business model, though that decision will largely seal its fate. We don't believe the subscription model is dead, far from it, but when *Tera: Rising* pushed past 1.4 million subscribers shortly after going free-to-play and with *Star Wars: The Old Republic* reportedly more profitable since it has made the switch – it would be hard to imagine a world where *WildStar*'s socially-led gameplay doesn't opt for the harmless monetisation of its players.

The path system will likely make or break *WildStar*, and once ample time is spent in Nexus it will quickly become clear which it will be. It has the potential to cater the experience to very specific demographics; with lore hounds able to become scientists in search of *WildStar*'s clever writing, and settlers able to help players acquire a unique plot of instanced land to build houses for other players. If you're bored of fetch and kill quests, there's plenty of scope to do other engaging activities on Nexus.

Still, with our hands-on experiences limited to strict paths and quest lines, we haven't had the opportunity to properly explore the world and push the game to find its limits, because with the way Carbine continues to explain and present *WildStar*, it seems limitless.

"We wanted to create something that was bright and stylised that would hold up over years and years"

Publisher: Square Enix **Developer:** In-house **Origin:** Japan **Release Date:** 27 August **Players:** MMO

6 REASONS WHY FINAL FANTASY XIV WILL WORK ON PLAYSTATION

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn will be nearing release by the time this issue is in your hands, and here are six reasons console users will still get the most out of Square Enix's long-gestating MMO…



1 THE FULL EXPERIENCE

MMOS HAVE traditionally made the jump from PC in a nuanced state, with mechanics and systems stripped away to work within the constraints of home consoles. Square Enix is delivering the full *A Realm Reborn* experience on PS3, however, making sure the game handles the same on both platforms – a necessary struggle, as players will not only be able to play side-by-side with their PC brethren, but even play their characters on both formats.



2 THE HOTBAR REBORN

ADAPTING THE hotbar – the row of icons mapped that allow you to effortlessly use abilities and emote – to the DualShock controller is tricky, but Square Enix seems to have nailed it. The D-pad and face buttons active various commands, while the L2/R2 buttons let you cycle through your character's abilities. It's tactile enough to appease even the most jaded console MMO players, though a mouse and keyboard option is available.



3 A MIRROR IMAGE

FINAL FANTASY XIV has five playable races, meaning there is plenty of opportunity to impose your personification onto your digital avatar. There's a great deal of customisation to be had, more than many of *A Realm Reborn*'s peers have ever been willing to offer, with everything from body shape, hair, and voice all ready to be customised between; human Hyurs, the mysterious Elezen, dwarfish Lalafells, brutish Roegadyns and the cat-like Miqo'tes.



4 A REALM REBORN

FINAL FANTASY XIV is aptly named, as Naoki Yoshida has had the opportunity to destroy a world and completely rebuild it. The original 2010 release is largely considered to be a failure, but Square has clearly learned its lesson. The PS3 version doesn't quite match the PC version's visual fidelity, but it isn't anything to scoff at either. In sacrificing some of the graphical effects, it runs smoother than many of the RPGs on the market.



5 FAN SERVICE

ONE OF the major criticisms with the original release of *Final Fantasy XIV* was because of its detached nature to the wider *Final Fantasy* mythos. Thankfully, Square Enix is addressing this by diving into the 25 years of franchise history. This will creep into all aspects of the game, with Chocobos ready to be ridden as mounts, Moogle postmen, legacy clothing, Limit Breaks and iconic locations and enemies from past games all making appearances.



6 FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHT

YOU'LL NEED to fight for your right to be a champion in *A Realm Reborn*, and combat is fantastically fast and fluid. Whether your poison is melee, ranged or magic, everyone is catered to. Interestingly, your class is determined by the weapon you have equipped, not a tick box at the beginning of the game. This should mean players can experience the full range of options without having to create a new character once they get weary of the grind.



GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Rob Hill

Senior producer, Trion Worlds

Defiance has been a surprise success for Trion Worlds. The FPS/MMO hybrid launched across three platforms alongside a brand-new original Syfy series, and with the first season now wrapped up, Trion is looking towards its first DLC pack to expand Defiance's scope and gameplay options



We've seen a new enemy type on the TV show, are they going to be introduced in the upcoming DLC?
In the pilot there was an enemy at the end called the Volge, and we haven't shown them in the game yet, but we are going to be unveiling them for the first time in our downloadable content. The other thing is that with our first DLC we are allowing you to change your species to what's called a Caspian, that's also a huge race that's in the game.

You don't have to start your character over or anything like that, you basically get this item when you buy the DLC that allows you to go back to the character creation screen again, change to what you want, customise it the way you want, and then come back in and you'll have all your weapons, your stats, all the things that you earned – but you'll at least look different.

Do you think the new world events being introduced for *Defiance* will be a good incentive for players to pick up the DLC?
Anybody can participate. Even though this is part of our downloadable content, you don't have to buy the DLC in order to participate in these new world events that we have; anybody will be able to do that. The reason we did that is because we didn't want to take people away from the things that they really enjoy and not be able to play them with their friends, even if their friends bought the downloadable content.

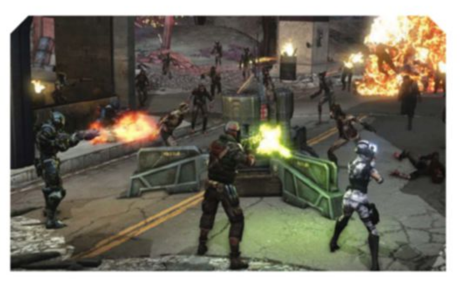
> "Even though this is part of our downloadable content, you don't have to buy the DLC in order to participate in these new world events"

So are there any difference in the world events between people who have purchased the content and those who haven't?
Nothing actually. They'll be able to participate just like everybody else, and [while] they might not be able to get the same rewards out of the event as people who purchased the DLC, they will be able to participate and at least get some kind of reward.

How long are you planning on supporting *Defiance* for with updates and DLC packs?
As long as we can; it's a lot of fun to build for, players are into it, the show got renewed for a second season…

With the next generation of gaming approaching fast, do you feel that this is going to affect the lifespan of *Defiance*? Or will it keep going regardless?
I think it will keep going regardless. The transition is usually not too fast; the hardcore will get it first but there is still a whole bunch of people we can support with the older generation. The fan base, particularly with this generation of consoles is huge, so I don't see it dying all that quick. Particularly with the [console] prices that were announced.





Defiance's first DLC pack doesn't have a release date at time of print, but is expected sometime before the end of 2013.



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